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## **Another Issue Comes Out: Gay Rights Policy Voting in Recent U.S. Presidential Elections**

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*Drawing from the theory of policy voting, this study examines the impact of opinions about gay rights on voting for presidential candidates. Qualitative analysis of the major party platforms and candidate campaign rhetoric from the six presidential elections held between 1988 and 2008 indicates that Democratic and Republican presidential candidates began openly expressing opposing positions on gay rights issues in 1992. Quantitative analysis of public opinion shows that, starting in 1992 and continuing through 2008, gay rights issues became more salient to the public, and opinions about gay rights began to exert a significant effect on vote choice. The study concludes with a discussion of the partisan forces that shaped the electoral significance of gay rights issues during the period from 1988 to 2008 and speculation about the role of gay rights issues in shaping future partisan electoral strategy.*

**KEYWORDS** *policy voting, voting behavior, public opinion, gay rights issues, same-sex marriage, presidential elections, election campaigns, candidate strategy*

What role have gay rights issues played in recent U.S. presidential elections? In the aftermath of the 2004 election, scholars debated the extent to which same-sex marriage contributed to the re-election of President George W. Bush (Abramowitz, 2004; Burden, 2004; Campbell & Monson, 2008; Donovan, Tolbert, & Smith, 2008; Hillygus & Shields, 2005, 2008; Lewis, 2005; McDonald, 2004), but no such discussion followed the 1992 election, the first national race to feature major party candidates engaged in open debate over gay rights. Nor have scholars evaluated the role of gay rights issues in other

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recent presidential elections. The neglect of gay rights issues in analyses of recent electoral behavior is curious, given scholars' longstanding attention to the influence of moral issues on mass political behavior (for recent discussions, see Abramowitz, 1997; Adams, 1997; Brewer & Stonecash, 2007; Carmines & Layman, 1997; Carmines & Wagner, 2006; Edsall, 1997; Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2006; Hunter, 1991; Jelen, 1997; Kaufmann, 2002; Knuckey, 2005, 2007; Layman, 2001; Lindaman & Haider-Markel, 2002; Mockabee, 2007; Mulligan, 2008; Sobnosky, 1993; White, 2003; for earlier discussions, see Ladd & Hadley, 1978; Phillips, 1969; Scammon & Wattenberg, 1970).

Employing the theoretical framework of policy voting, this article examines the engagement of presidential candidates with issues of gay rights and the subsequent impact of those issues on voter choice. Six recent elections provide good cases for testing hypotheses about the relationships between candidate strategy and voter behavior. Collectively, the elections offer considerable variation in the quantity and quality of presidential candidates' engagement with gay rights issues. According to the precepts of policy voting, such variation should produce corresponding variation in the extent to which gay rights issues influence voter choice. The article begins with an overview of policy voting theory, and then provides accounts of the treatment of gay rights issues in the presidential campaigns and the news media and analyses of the impact of these issues on voter choice during the six elections held between 1988 and 2008. The article concludes by examining the forces that shaped the electoral significance of gay rights issues during this period and the ways in which strategic candidates used the issues to improve their electoral fortunes.

## POLICY VOTING

Scholars define policy voting as the extent to which choices among candidates are caused by voters acting in accord with their policy preferences (Brody & Page, 1972, p. 450). Voters make policy-based choices when they select the candidate nearest to them on the issues the voters regard as important. While we cannot ascertain whether a particular person engages in policy voting, we can evaluate "whether there are meaningful relationships between policy preferences and ballot decisions . . . in the electorate overall" (Highton, 2004, p. 182). Assessment of these relationships requires that we consider both voter engagement and the electoral context.

In regard to voter engagement, treatments of policy voting generally agree that voters must have an opinion about an issue, know the policy alternatives offered by the parties or their candidates, and take their opinion and knowledge into account when deciding how to vote (for pioneering discussions, see Downs, 1957; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). Voters are more likely to meet these criteria if the electoral context is

informative and stimulating (Aldrich, Sullivan, & Borgida, 1989; Fiorina, 1981; Franklin, 1991; Key, 1966; Page, 1976, 1978; Page & Brody, 1972; Pomper, 1972; RePass, 1971).

If an issue does not receive attention, it is less likely to be salient to voters. Candidate or media attention to an issue heightens its salience and increases the likelihood that attentive voters will incorporate the issue into their voting calculus. Two sets of findings support this point. First, research on agenda-setting demonstrates that exposure to news coverage of an issue heightens the perceived importance of the issue (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Rogers & Dearing, 1988). Politicians can also directly influence perceptions of issue importance via public addresses (Behr & Iyengar, 1985) and campaign advertising (West, 2014). Second, research on priming indicates that news coverage affects the criteria voters use in evaluating incumbents and candidates. By drawing attention to particular policy issues, the news media and the sources that provide news material can define the evaluative standards viewers and readers apply to politicians (Hetherington, 1996; Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Krosnick & Brannon, 1993a, 1993b; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990).

The nature of the attention an issue receives is also important. If candidates address an issue equivocally, they obscure partisan differences on the issue, thus reducing the likelihood voters will base their decision on those differences. And even when candidates clearly delineate their stands, the news media may not always report them with accuracy. Unclear stands and inaccurate coverage undermine voter certainty, thus diminishing the likelihood that voters will incorporate policy preferences into their decisions (Alvarez, 1998; Bartels, 1986; Highton, 2010).

Policy voting, then, is a function of the quantity and quality of attention that candidates and the media give to an issue as well as the degree to which voters engage with it.

## GAY RIGHTS ISSUES IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

U.S. presidential campaigns unfold in multiple arenas. In their platforms, the political parties lay out their stands on policy issues, many of which the parties repeat from one election to the next. Presidential candidates generally focus on just a subset of these issues, formulating a campaign agenda to emphasize their strengths and to address matters of immediate concern to voters. The news media provide a third arena, and in their coverage of presidential election campaigns, the media may or may not accurately present the positions of the parties and the agenda of their candidates. Using party platforms, nomination speeches, and various scholarly and journalistic reports, I turn now to describe how the parties, candidates, and media treated gay issues during the period from 1988 to 2008. I begin with 1988 because the

1988 American National Election Study (ANES) was the first in the ANES series to include a question about support for gay rights; these data drive the voting analysis presented later in the article.

### Political Parties and Presidential Candidates Discuss Gay Rights

Gay rights issues garnered scant attention in the 1988 campaign. In its platform, the Democratic Party mentioned “assuring equal access to government services, employment, housing, business enterprise and education to every citizen regardless of . . . sexual orientation,” but the Republicans offered no such assurance in their platform.<sup>1</sup> Jesse Jackson addressed issues of concern to gays during the Democratic presidential primaries and national convention, but the other candidates in both major parties ignored these issues throughout the election, despite the efforts of gay activists to put them on the campaign agenda.

In the 1992 presidential election, gay rights issues moved into the spotlight. Throughout the campaign, the major party candidates unambiguously discussed gay rights. Bill Clinton declared his opposition to discrimination against homosexuals, promising that, if elected, he would order a reversal of the Pentagon’s ban on homosexuals serving in the United States military. In his acceptance speech at the Democratic nomination convention, he spoke of gays as part of a unified America. Clinton also spoke frequently at fundraising events staged by gay organizations and openly sought the support of gay voters.

President George Bush took the opposite stand. Using polarizing, moralistic rhetoric, his campaign frequently expressed opposition to liberal policies on gay issues. Vice President Dan Quayle, for example, asserted that homosexuality is “a matter of choice,” the “wrong choice” (DeWitt, 1992), and that Bush would “stand up for basic values, rather than treating all life-style choices as morally equivalent” (Wines, 1992). Although Bush did not mention gay issues in his nomination acceptance speech, Pat Buchanan, in his prime-time convention speech, called for a cultural civil war over such issues as gay rights (<http://buchanan.org/blog/1992-republican-national-convention-speech-148>).

In contrast, Perot vacillated on gay rights issues. During an ABC interview broadcast in May, he said that “he would not appoint homosexuals to cabinet positions,” but a few weeks later he announced that “he would not rule out naming someone to a cabinet position on the basis of sexual orientation” and that he had appointed a lesbian as his California civil rights coordinator (Holmes, 1992). Although he initially declined to recant statements against homosexuals serving in the military, he later said that he favored an end to such policy (Kelly, 1992a).

The major party platforms reflect the differences their candidates expressed. The Democratic Party reaffirmed its commitment “to lead the

fight to ensure that no Americans suffer discrimination or the deprivation of rights on the basis of . . . sexual orientation.” It condemned homophobia and promised to “aggressively prosecute hate crimes.” It also pledged to “provide civil rights protection for gay men and lesbians and an end to Defense Department discrimination.” In contrast, the Republican Party opposed “efforts by the Democratic Party to include ‘sexual preference’ as a protected minority receiving preferential status under civil rights statutes” as well as “any legislation or law which legally recognizes same-sex marriages and allows such couples to adopt children or provide foster care.” The Republican platform also supported “the continued exclusion of homosexuals from the military.”<sup>2</sup>

In 1996 and 2000 the two major parties reiterated their positions, often using language nearly identical to that in their 1992 platforms, but the candidates in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections were not as clearly engaged with gay rights issues as Clinton and Bush had been in 1992.

In 1996 the candidates dealt with gay rights in ways that obscured their stands. Bob Dole and President Clinton did not face off on gay rights as Bush and Clinton did in 1992, and both were forced to reveal the limits of their support for gay rights in situations that made each appear to equivocate. Before the 1996 campaign began, Dole pledged he would not discriminate against homosexuals seeking employment in his Senate office. He also repudiated aides who, acting without his knowledge, had returned a campaign contribution to the Log Cabin Republicans. But when faced with challenges from conservative opponents in the presidential primaries, Dole declined to say he would have supported a Senate bill banning job discrimination against homosexuals that had recently failed by one vote. He also endorsed the Christian Coalition’s opposition to same-sex marriage at an anti-gay rally. Dole let cultural issues fade into the background once he secured the Republican nomination, then revived them late in the campaign by stating his opposition to “special rights” for gays (McWilliams, 1997; Woodward, 1996). Clinton confounded his record of support for gay rights by signing the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA, 1996) and advertising his action in a radio spot aimed at religious conservatives, despite his earlier statements that the legislation amounted to gay baiting (Purdum, 1996; Sandalow, 1996). He was also dogged by his 1993 “don’t ask, don’t tell” compromise on gays in the military—a policy different from the policy he had promised during the 1992 campaign and one that failed to satisfy either proponents or opponents of allowing gays to serve in the armed forces. Neither Dole nor Clinton mentioned gay rights in his nomination acceptance speech. Perot generally avoided taking stands on gay rights during the 1996 election (Kunerth, 1996).

In 2000 the candidates rarely discussed gay rights. George W. Bush took the position that homosexuality does not matter, implying a policy of inclusiveness without articulating specific measures he would support. Al Gore called for a ban on discrimination against gays without proposing

specific policies to achieve that goal. Gay rights issues were absent from the candidates' nomination speeches.

In contrast, the 2004 presidential election brought renewed prominence to gay rights, primarily through debate over same-sex marriage. President Bush raised the issue in his 2004 State of the Union address when he embraced a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage. John Kerry and John Edwards, the emerging front runners in the Democratic presidential primary, opposed the amendment but took care also to oppose same-sex marriage. Instead, they expressed support for giving gay couples the rights contained in civil unions. The Republican and Democratic nominees maintained their distinctive positions on this issue throughout the campaign, and Bush considered the defense of marriage issue important enough to mention it in his nomination acceptance speech at the Republican national party convention.

The 2004 party platforms echoed these distinctions. The Republican platform criticized "activist judges [who] are redefining the institution of marriage," supported "President Bush's call for a constitutional amendment that fully protects marriage," and repeatedly referred to promoting families in which the wellbeing of children is nurtured by a mother and a father "anchored by the bonds of marriage." Although the Republican platform declared that the party "favors aggressive, proactive measures to ensure that no individual is discriminated against," it did not mention protections for gays. In contrast, the Democratic platform stated, "We support full inclusion of gay and lesbian families in the life of our nation and seek equal opportunities, benefits, and protections for these families" and urged that marriage continue to be defined by the states rather than by a federal amendment. The Democratic platform also affirmed the party's "ironclad" commitment to civil rights, promising to bar workplace discrimination, provide equal treatment for all service members, and support a national law to punish hate crimes.

Gay rights receded in prominence in the 2008 presidential election, but candidates Barack Obama and John McCain gave enough attention to the issues to establish both similarities and differences in their positions. Obama pledged to repeal "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"; McCain disagreed. Obama and McCain both opposed same-sex marriage, yet both opposed a constitutional amendment to outlaw same-sex marriage (Abramson, Aldrich, & Rohde, 2012). Obama promised to assure that GLBT people would have equal rights, a point he addressed in his nomination speech. McCain did not discuss gay rights in his nomination speech.

The 2008 party platforms are not entirely consistent with the positions their respective candidates expressed. While the Democratic Party platform spoke of fighting to end discrimination based on, among other characteristics, sexual orientation, and supporting "the full inclusion of all families, including same-sex couples, in the life of our nation," it also stated opposition to DOMA. The Republican Party platform called for "a constitutional

amendment that fully protects marriage as a union of a man and a woman,” or absent that, “the right of the people of the various states to affirm traditional marriage through state initiatives.” In addition, the platform affirmed safeguards on religious liberties, including the protection of groups that decline to arrange adoptions by same-sex couples.

### News Media Coverage of Gay Rights

Did the news media accurately portray the variation in attention to gay rights issues? To answer this question, [Table 1](#) provides the results of quantitative and qualitative analyses of news coverage by the *New York Times*. The table presents data from January 1 through election eve for each of the six presidential elections, 1988 through 2008. A full description of the keyword search appears in the note below the table. There is no assumption that the average voter is familiar with the *New York Times*. Indeed, most Americans do not read the *Times*, but as a “paper of record,” it often provides news material for the outlets people do use. Here, the source serves as an indicator of patterns in news coverage in the mainstream print and broadcast media. In addition, use of the *Times* has the benefit of providing a news media source that, over 20 years, has changed less than the broadcast media, a feature that facilitates comparisons of coverage over a long period of time.

The first empirical column in the top panel of the table reports the total number of campaign articles. These counts provide a rough measure of the total amount of attention given to a particular presidential election; they indicate that the amount of attention did not vary much over the six campaigns.

The next two columns focus on articles that mention one or more gay issues and at least one of the candidates. One column reports the raw number of articles; the other reports each count as a percentage of the total number of campaign articles. Consistent with the qualitative account of the campaigns, gay issues appeared least often in news coverage of the 1988 and 2008 elections and most often in news coverage of the 2004 election. The only unexpected finding is that the *Times* gave more attention to gay rights in 1996 and 2000 than it did in 1992. These data, however, provide only part of the story.

More of the story appears in the two right-most columns of the top panel and in the middle panel of the table. To generate the data reported in the top panel, two coders—both unaware of the purpose of the study—read each of the articles that mentioned at least one gay issue and at least one candidate to determine whether an article explicitly connected at least one candidate to an issue. The first of the pair of columns reports the number of articles in which the connection was explicit; the second reports each count as a percentage of the number of articles that mentioned at least one gay issue and at least one candidate. The coders also noted which candidate was connected to an issue and whether connections that mentioned two or



**TABLE 1** *New York Times* coverage of gay issues during presidential election campaigns

Election year	Total campaign articles <sup>a</sup>	Articles mention gay issue(s) and at least one candidate <sup>b</sup>		Articles explicitly connect position(s) on gay issue(s) to at least one candidate <sup>c</sup>		
		#	% of total articles	#	% of gay articles	
1988	2032	25	1.2%	12	48%	
1992	2293	72	3.1%	46	64%	
1996	1943	73	3.8%	28	38%	
2000	2245	92	4.1%	43	47%	
2004	2133	159	7.4%	59	37%	
2008	2009	41	2.0%	12	29%	

	Explicitly connect one candidate			Explicitly connect at least two candidates		
	Democrat	Republican	Other	Different	Similar	Same
1988	5	3	—	2	1	1
1992	15	13	7	11	—	—
1996	16	3	—	6	3	—
2000	21	9	1	6	5	1
2004	9	26	—	19	5	—
2008	1	6	—	1	4	—

Topics Mentioned in Articles that Explicitly Connect One or More Candidates						
	# topics	Gay rights	AIDS	Military	Marriage	Adoption
1988	14	36%	36%	—	—	28%
1992	64	55%	14%	20%	5%	6%
1996	45	31%	4%	33%	31%	—
2000	46	24%	—	46%	28%	2%
2004	60	7%	—	—	93%	—
2008	13	8%	—	—	77%	15%

Source. Lexis-Nexis Universe (<http://www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic/>)

Note. Entries generated by the “advanced search” option using “terms and connectors” as the search type. Within each list of results, the search was refined by limiting the list to articles from the National Desk. The dates of the search were January 1 through election eve of each election year.

<sup>a</sup>The following search terms generated the total number of campaign articles: (Republican candidate name OR Democratic candidate name OR significant third party candidate name) AND presidential.

<sup>b</sup>The following search terms generated the list of articles that mention gay issues and at least one candidate: ((gay\* OR homosexual\*) w/10 (right\* OR discriminat\* OR military OR marriage OR adopt\* OR aids)) AND (Republican candidate name OR Democratic candidate name OR significant third-party candidate name) AND presidential. The significant third-party candidate name ‘Perot’ was used in 1992 and 1996; ‘Nader’ was used in 2000. Although he was not a third-party candidate, Jackson’s name was included in the 1988 search because he addressed gay issues throughout the election year.

<sup>c</sup>These articles are a subset of those generated in the search described in part b of the Note. They provide the basis for the data shown in the second and third panels of the table. Entries in the second panel are the number of articles that explicitly describe the position of one or more candidates on one or more gay issues. Entries in the third panel are the percentage of mentions given to a particular topic, as a proportion of the total number of topics covered by the articles. Some articles mentioned multiple topics.

more candidates described the candidates' positions as different, similar, or the same. Those data are reported in the middle panel of the table.<sup>3</sup>

Of all the campaigns described above, the 1992 contest offered the clearest contrasts between the positions of the two major party candidates. The 1992 data on news coverage correspondingly show the highest percentage of articles that explicitly link candidates to gay issues (64%), and all the articles that explicitly connected two or more candidates to a position on gay issues ( $n = 11$ ) indicate that the candidates took different positions. The data for the two years when the candidates blurred their positions—1996 and 2008—show low percentages of articles linking the candidates to gay issues (38% and 29%, respectively), most of the attention going to only one of the candidates (Clinton in 1996, McCain in 2008), and some coverage that indicates the candidates were more similar than different (especially in 2008).

The data for the other years are consistent in some respects with the qualitative account of the campaigns, but in other respects are difficult to interpret. In 2000, for example, were Gore and Bush were so vague about their positions that half the articles explicitly connecting them to a position described their positions as different ( $n = 6$ ), but the other half portrayed them as the same ( $n = 5$ )? Both candidates were evasive about their positions, but the *Times* coverage connects Gore to gay issues ( $n = 21$ ) more often than it connects Bush to them ( $n = 9$ ).

Finally, the coders examined the specific topics discussed in the articles that explicitly connected at least one candidate to a gay issue. Did the articles emphasize topics that dominated the candidates' discussions of gay issues? To some extent, they did. The most striking evidence appears for 2004, when 93% of the topics mentioned in the 59 articles pertained to same-sex marriage, the gay issue that dominated the 2004 presidential election. Although gay rights in general received the most coverage in 1992 (55%), the specific right mentioned most often was the right of gays to serve in the armed forces (20%). That topic also dominated the campaign discussions of gay rights. In 1996 the *Times* gave about equal attention to gay rights in general, gays in the military, and same-sex marriage—all topics that figured in campaign discussions of gay rights. In 1988, when the matters of military service and same-sex marriage were absent from mainstream discussions about gays, they also failed to appear in news coverage of the election campaign. Gay rights in general (36%) and AIDS (36%) garnered attention, along with the topic of same-sex couples adopting children (28%). The considerable emphasis on adoption reflects campaign discussion of Dukakis's preferential treatment of heterosexual couples in foster care placements, a policy he promoted as governor of Massachusetts.

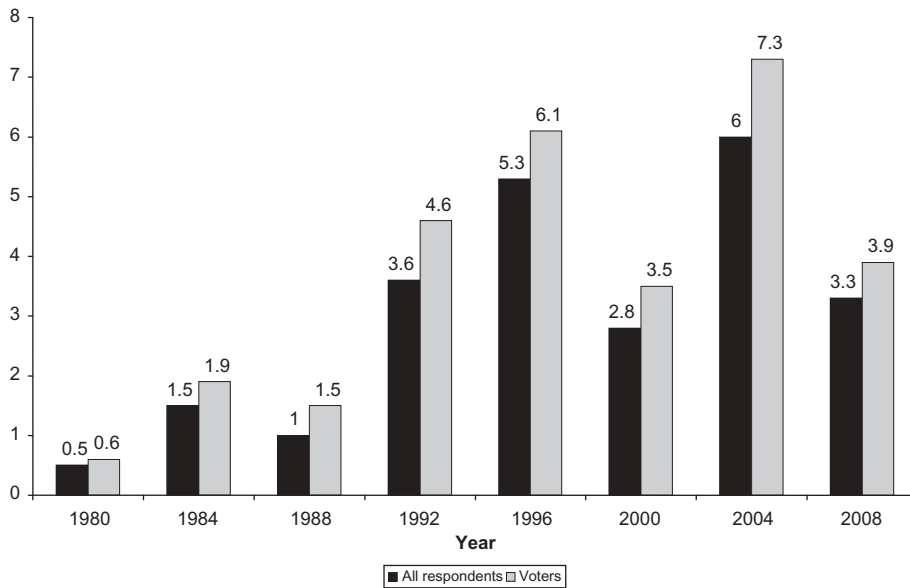
To conclude, the evidence presented here indicates that, more often than not, coverage of gay issues in the *New York Times* during the six presidential election campaigns under consideration paralleled fairly closely the campaigns' attention to the issues. When the candidates expressed

clear stands, the coverage connected the candidates to their positions on the issues. When the candidates were ambiguous or evasive, the coverage tended to reflect the ambiguity or evasion. And when specific rights were prominent in campaign discourse, they also tended to be prominent in news accounts.

### THE SALIENCE OF GAY ISSUES IN THE MASS PUBLIC

Candidate rhetoric and party platforms indicate that the 1992 election was a turning point in the electoral relevance of gay rights. The major party candidates clearly and repeatedly discussed the issue, the parties addressed it in their platforms, and the news media faithfully reported this information. The clarity and intensity of the campaign debate may have heightened voters' interest in and understanding of partisan differences on the topic. If so, survey data should show that the issue of gay rights became more salient to the mass public and more influential in partisan choices, perhaps as early as 1992. If we do find such outcomes, then the question arises: How long do these patterns persist when the characteristics of campaign discourse change? In 1996 and 2000 the national party platforms offered statements on gay rights that clearly reinforced the differences initially stated in the 1992 Democratic and Republican platforms, but the rhetoric of the presidential candidates did not always match the consistency and clarity of the platform statements. Candidate statements about gay rights issues were ambiguous in 1996 and rare in 2000. The election of 2004 saw the return of frequent, clear statements that revealed the polarity of the presidential candidates' stands on gay rights, especially the issue of same-sex marriage. Then, in 2008, the two major party candidates took some positions that were similar (on the issue of same-sex marriage) and some positions that were different (on the issue of gays in the armed forces), and in both cases their positions diverged somewhat from those of their respective parties. How did the public respond to these inconstant or inconsistent cues?

Assessing issue salience over time would be easy if surveys repeatedly posed direct questions about the importance of gay issues, but they have not. The ANES surveys do, however, provide an alternative means to measure issue salience.<sup>4</sup> Each survey includes open-ended questions that ask respondents what they like and dislike about each of the two major parties and their presidential candidates. Respondents are encouraged to offer multiple comments. If a respondent referred to gay rights or mentioned some aspect of homosexuality in answering any one of these questions, I coded gay issues as "salient" to her or him. The 1980 survey was the first to code references to homosexuality and gay rights; so data from 1980 and 1984 are included to provide a broader context for assessing salience. These questions are conservative measures of issue salience. Open-ended questions



**FIGURE 1** Salience of Gay Issues. *Source.* 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008 American National Election Studies.

*Note.* Entries are percentages of all respondents or voters who mentioned gay rights or some aspect of homosexuality in answering any one of the eight open-ended likes/dislikes questions about the two major parties and their presidential candidates.

require respondents to react in their own words to topics that the average person only occasionally considers, and there are no obvious cues to guide respondents' answers. Notwithstanding these limitations, the questions provide a consistent over-time measure of the salience of an issue.

Figure 1 shows the salience of gay issues among two groups of citizens, members of the mass public and members of the voting public. Presumably the voting public is more attentive to the issues addressed by the campaigns and the media. The over-time patterns in issue salience should be similar in the two publics, but in any given year the salience of gay issues should be higher in the voting public. The evidence confirms both expectations. The salience of gay issues grew steadily from 1980 to 1996, declined in 2000, increased in 2004, and declined again in 2008. In each year the salience of the issues was a bit higher among voters compared to nonvoters.

What does this evidence say about the salience of gay issues? Compared to domestic economic issues, which dominated respondents' comments in many recent elections, or foreign policy issues, which dominated in 2004 (Abramson, Aldrich, & Rohde, 2007), gay issues have been low in salience. The point to note, though, is that variations in issue salience parallel the variations in attention the presidential campaigns gave to these issues. It is also crucial to note that the limited salience of gay rights does not mean

that the public lacked opinions on the topic. In each presidential election year since 1988, ANES respondents have been asked if they favor or oppose “laws to protect homosexuals against job discrimination.” One or more of the subsequent presidential election year surveys have also asked respondents whether they favor or oppose allowing homosexuals to serve in the United States Armed Forces (asked in every year except 1988), legally permitting gay or lesbian couples to adopt children (asked in every year except 1988 and 1996), and granting same-sex couples the right to marry (asked in 2004 and 2008). When directly asked to express a position on gay rights, few respondents failed to offer one. In every instance but one, less than 5% of the respondents in any of the six ANES surveys said they did not know where they stood on a specific right for gays. The single exception is the adoption item in the 2000 survey; 7% of the respondents failed to express an opinion.<sup>5</sup>

## THE IMPACT OF GAY RIGHTS OPINIONS ON PRESIDENTIAL VOTE CHOICE

### Hypotheses

The criteria for policy voting specify that voters have an opinion about the issue in question, perceive policy differences between the parties or their candidates, and take their opinion and perceptions into account when deciding how to vote. We have established that nearly all voters expressed opinions about gay rights during the six presidential elections under consideration. Unfortunately, we lack direct measures of voters’ perceptions of policy differences. We must instead assume that the variations in campaign rhetoric and news coverage created conditions in which voters were more or less aware of partisan differences on gay rights issues. Our assessment of the salience of gay issues provides a conservative degree of support for this assumption. If voters’ perceptions track variations in rhetoric and news, and if voters take their own opinions into account when deciding how to vote, we should find that gay rights opinions exert the strongest effects in years when the issues were most salient. Considering that different gay rights issues emerged in different elections, we should also find that opinions about certain issues sometimes have stronger effects than opinions about others. The following hypotheses are based on the evidence presented above:

(H1) In 1988 opinions about gay rights did not affect presidential vote choice. The major party nominees did not discuss gay rights issues during the campaign, media coverage of the issues was thin, and the issues were not especially salient to the public.

(H2) In 1992 opinion about allowing gays to serve in the armed forces had a large effect on presidential vote choice. The major party candidates frequently and consistently laid out their differences on this particular

issue, media coverage of gay rights issues exceeded the level of coverage in the previous presidential election, and the issues were especially salient to the public.

(H3) In 1996 and 2000 opinions about gay rights had smaller, but significant, effects on presidential vote choice. Although the major party nominees in those two elections did not treat gay rights in the sustained and divergent manner that the candidates did in 1992, the issues remained on the parties' platforms, in the news, and salient to the public. Because the controversy surrounding "Don't ask; don't tell" continued to figure prominently in campaign discussion of gay rights, opinion about gays serving in the military is expected to have had an effect larger than the opinions about other gay rights.<sup>6</sup>

(H4) In 2004 opinion about same-sex marriage had a large effect on presidential vote choice. The issue received sustained attention from the major party candidates and their parties, and it dominated news coverage of gay rights. Also, the salience of gay issues in the mass public spiked to the highest level ever.

(H5) In 2008 opinions about gay rights had, at best, modest effects on presidential vote choice. The two major party candidates were not strongly engaged with gay rights issues, and some of their positions were similar yet divergent from those of their respective parties. News coverage of the issues was nearly as limited as coverage in the 1988 campaign, and the salience of the issues declined from its peak in 2004. Same-sex marriage dominated the limited news coverage of gay rights issues; so if any opinion had an effect on vote choice, opinion about same-sex marriage is the likely candidate.

For all hypotheses, voters who supported gay rights are expected to have voted for the Democratic presidential candidate.

## Models

To test the hypotheses, I employ a standard model of vote choice.<sup>7</sup> The dependent variable is presidential vote choice. In 1992 and 1996 the vote choice variable represents the three-way choice that includes Perot as well as the two major party candidates. In 1988, 2000, 2004, and 2008 the variable represents the two-party choice; third-party choices were rare enough to warrant exclusion as missing data. The dichotomous vote choice variable is coded 1 for the Democratic candidate, 0 for the Republican candidate. The trichotomous vote choice variable is coded so that the incumbent is the reference candidate; thus, models are estimated for the two nonincumbents. The incumbent is used as the referent on the assumption that people decided whether to vote for Clinton or Perot in 1992 and Dole or Perot in 1996 by considering the two challengers in comparison to the incumbent. The choice of reference candidate does not affect the results.

The independent variables include the variables of primary interest—a set of measures of opinion about gay rights—and several variables representing the political orientations and demographic characteristics that analyses of presidential vote choice have shown to exert significant effects. The political orientations include opinions about issues other than gay rights, retrospective evaluation of the economy, party identification, ideological orientation, and, in the models for 1992 and 1996, two variables that scholars have identified as influencing voters' support for Perot. The demographic characteristics are sex, race, age, education, and religiosity. I turn now to provide specific details about the selection of variables.

The models include every measure of opinion about gay rights available for a given year, which allows me to test for effects specific to the particular gay rights issues on which the candidates and the parties focused. The inclusion of these variables distinguishes the models presented here from those found in most studies, which rarely include opinion about gay rights as a factor that might influence vote choice.<sup>8</sup> More typically, studies of voter choice include opinions about welfare, race, and defense or foreign policy. A few of the more recent studies also include opinions about social issues, usually abortion rights (Abramowitz, 1995; Alvarez & Nagler, 1995, 1998; Hillygus & Shields, 2005; Mockabee, 2007; Mulligan, 2008; Wattier, Daynes, & Tatalovich, 1997). Hence, the models here incorporate the single-item measures of opinion about various gay rights (protection from job discrimination, service in the military, adoption, and marriage), a three-item index of opinions about welfare, a three-item index of opinions about race, and single-item measures of opinions about defense spending and abortion rights.<sup>9</sup> Each of these measures of opinion has been rescaled to range from 0 to 1, where 0 represents the most politically conservative position, 1 represents the most politically liberal position, and the values between 0 and 1 represent more moderate positions.

Paralleling other analyses of presidential vote choice, the models also include retrospective evaluation of the economy, party identification, ideological orientation, and a set of demographic controls. Evaluation of the economy has been rescaled to range from 0 to 1, where 0 represents conditions most favorable to the Republican candidate (in 1988, 1992, 2004, and 2008, 0 = *much better*; in 1996 and 2000, 0 = *much worse*), 1 represents conditions most favorable to the Democratic candidate (in 1988, 1992, 2004, and 2008, 1 = *much worse*; in 1996 and 2000, 1 = *much better*), and the values between 0 and 1 represent conditions of intermediate favorability. Party identification and ideological orientation have been rescaled to range from 0 (strong Republican or extreme conservative) to 1 (strong Democratic or extreme liberal); the values between 0 and 1 represent weaker partisan identities or more moderate ideological orientations. The demographic controls are sex (0 = male, 1 = female), race (0 = nonblack, 1 = black), age (rescaled to range from 0 (age 18) to 1 (oldest respondent in sample)), education

(rescaled to range from 0 (eighth grade or lower) to 1 (advanced degree)), and religiosity (a three-item index rescaled to range from 0 (weakest) to 1 (strongest)).

The models for 1992 and 1996 include two additional variables other studies identify as factors that affected the likelihood of voting for Perot: independence from the two major parties and distrust of government (Abramson, Aldrich, & Rhode, 1994, 1997; Gold, 1995; Koch, 1998). Perot tended to attract voters who lacked attachments to the two major parties or who were cynical about the government, some of whom had long been nonvoters. Independence is the folded party identification item rescaled to range from 0 (strong identification with either party) to 1 (independence from political parties); the two positions between 0 and 1 represent weak identification with either party and independence with a tendency to lean toward either party. Distrust in government is a four-item index that has been rescaled to range from 0 (least distrust) to 1 (most distrust); the positions between 0 and 1 represent more moderate levels of distrust.

Exact question wordings for all items and alpha coefficients for the indices can be found in the Appendix. Estimation of the models proceeded via logistic regression (1988, 2000, 2004, 2008) or multinomial logistic regression (1992 and 1996).<sup>10</sup>

## RESULTS

Table 2 reports the results. Of primary interest is the influence of opinions about gay rights. Voters who were more supportive of gay rights should have been more likely to choose the Democratic presidential candidate in each year that opinions about gay rights had effects on vote choice. As hypothesized, gay rights opinion had no statistically significant effect on vote choice in the 1988 presidential election. Opinions about gay rights did, however, affect vote choice in each of the subsequent presidential contests. The effects indicate that voters with more favorable opinions about gay rights were more likely to support Clinton and Perot in 1992, Gore in 2000, Kerry in 2004, and Obama in 2008 and less likely to support Dole in 1996. When candidates emphasized a specific gay rights issue—here, gays in the military in 1992 and 1996 and same-sex marriage in 2004—opinion about that one issue had a significant effect on vote choice. The magnitude of the effects do not exactly conform to the expectations stated in the hypotheses (the coefficients that appear in 1996 and 2000 are somewhat larger than those that appear in 1992 and 2004), but comparing the size of the coefficients across models is complicated by the changing mix of gay rights opinion items. The only truly unexpected results occur in 2000 and 2008, when opinions about job discrimination (rather than gays in the military) and adoption (rather than same-sex marriage), respectively, had significant effects on vote choice.



**TABLE 2** Determinants of vote choice in U.S. presidential elections, 1988–2008

	1992			1996			2000	2004	2008
	1988	Clinton	Perot	Dole	Perot	Perot			
Gay jobs	.617	.567	-.048	-.291	-.155	1.217**	-.230	.661	
Gay military	.928**	.644*		-1.168**	-.250	-.309	-.942	.170	
Gay adoption	.422	.100				.590	.318	.574*	
Gay marriage							1.076*	-.013	
Abortion rights	1.343***	.338	.988**	-.812	-.630	.679	.812	.322	
Welfare index	1.569*	.564	.803	-2.518**	-.598	.827	1.226	1.447**	
Racial index	.777	.876	.236	-.446	.760	.918	1.778*	1.730***	
Defense spend	2.128***	.194	1.145*	-.744	-1.006	.981	2.550***	1.553***	
Economy	2.459***	1.826***	.970*	-3.570***	-2.999***	1.123*	2.795***	.518	
Party ID	4.503***	5.170***	2.212***	-4.768***	-1.904***	6.570***	5.759***	4.681***	
Ideology	2.473***	2.854***	.603	-2.664**	-.836	.630	.295	2.339***	
Independence		-.294	.559	.553	1.555**				
Distrust		-.783	1.320*	.033	1.801*				
Female	-.182	-.421	-.816***	-.080	-.449	-.283	-.335	-.196	
Black	1.524**	1.685**	-1.883	-3.656**	-1.771*	1.003	.281	2.988***	
Age	.497	1.357**	-.539	-.171	-2.151**	1.274	.781	-.308	
Education	-.148	-.702	-1.134**	1.078	-.832	.991	-.164	-1.115*	
Religiosity	.968*	-.884*	-.380	.519	.479	-.308	-.321	-.535	
Constant	-8.750***	-5.612***	-3.969***	7.329***	2.367	-7.480***	-7.234***	-5.770***	
<i>N</i>	717	1022		789		682	571	1169	
Cox & Snell	.52	.56		.60		.58	.60	.58	
% correctly predicted	86.5	73.7		83.5		89.7	89.5	89.7	

Source. 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008 American National Election Studies.

Note. Logistic regression generated the results for 1988, 2000, 2004, and 2008; the models predict voting for the Democratic candidate. Multinomial logistic regression generated the results for 1992 and 1996; the models predict voting for the nonincumbent candidates.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Before further discussing the significant effects, I will briefly note the effects of other variables. Retrospective evaluations of the economy significantly influenced vote choice in every year except 2008. Voters who thought the nation's economy had gotten much worse in 1988, 1992, and 2004 were more likely to support Dukakis, Clinton and Perot, and Kerry, respectively. Voters who thought the nation's economy had gotten much better in 1996 and 2000 were less likely to choose Dole or Perot and more likely to choose Gore, respectively. Not surprisingly, party identification also significantly shaped every vote choice, with Democratic identifiers more likely to pick Democratic presidential candidates (and Perot in 1992). Ideological orientations influenced major-party vote choices in four of the election years; liberals were more supportive of the Democratic candidates. Opinions about defense spending had significant effects in every election except 1996 and 2000. Opinions about welfare spending had significant effects in 1988, 1996, and 2008. Opinions on racial issues accounted for significant effects in 2004 and 2008. And opinions about abortion rights registered significant effects in 1988 and 1992. The effects of these issue opinions are in the expected direction; voters with liberal opinions were more likely to vote for Democratic candidates (and Perot in 1992). Also as expected, voters who were distrustful of government were more likely to vote for Perot both times he ran, but a sense of independence mattered only in 1996. Demographic characteristics had only sporadic effects.

To speak more precisely about the effects of gay rights opinions on vote choice, the coefficients in [Table 2](#) must be translated into probabilities of choosing different candidates, given specific characteristics of the voters. An efficient way to do so is to create a hypothetical voter with "typical" characteristics, then examine how the probability of choosing a particular candidate changes as the voter's characteristics are altered (King, 1989). I will focus on the changes in probabilities that result from alterations in opinions about gay rights among various groups of partisans. Putting aside for the moment party identification and the significant gay rights opinions, the hypothetical voters in this exercise are White women who hold the mean positions on issues other than the significant gay rights item,<sup>11</sup> express an average evaluation of the economy, adhere to the mean ideological orientation, and have the average age, education, and religiosity. In 1992 and 1996 the hypothetical voters have an average level of distrust toward the government, and they were assigned values on the "independence" variable that correspond with their strength of hypothetical partisanship (strong Democrats and strong Republicans = 0, weak Democrats and weak Republicans = .33, leaning Democrats and leaning Republicans = .67, pure independents = 1). Assigned mean values are specific to each partisan group in each year.

[Table 3](#) summarizes the relevant probabilities for the years when opinions about gay rights issues had significant effects on vote choice. Vote probabilities are reported for the Democratic and Republican candidates.

**TABLE 3** Simulated effects of gay rights opinions on presidential vote choice

1992	Clinton				Bush			
	Oppose	Mean	Favor	Diff F-O	Oppose	Mean	Favor	Diff F-O
SD	.90	.92	.93	+0.03	.04	.02	.02	-.02
WD	.71	.77	.81	+0.10	.13	.08	.05	-.08
LD	.54	.63	.67	+0.13	.21	.13	.10	-.11
I	.26	.32	.38	+0.12	.40	.31	.23	-.17
LR	.10	.13	.19	+0.09	.69	.62	.51	-.18
WR	.06	.09	.13	+0.07	.80	.74	.65	-.15
SR	.02	.02	.05	+0.03	.92	.91	.85	-.07

1996	Clinton				Dole			
	Oppose	Mean	Favor	Diff F-O	Oppose	Mean	Favor	Diff F-O
SD	.96	.97	.97	+0.01	.02	.01	.01	-.01
WD	.79	.86	.89	+0.10	.13	.06	.04	-.09
LD	.60	.72	.74	+0.14	.24	.12	.10	-.14
I	.23	.33	.40	+0.17	.53	.37	.28	-.25
LR	.11	.18	.25	+0.14	.80	.69	.58	-.22
WR	.07	.12	.18	+0.11	.89	.82	.74	-.15
SR	.01	.02	.04	+0.03	.98	.97	.94	-.04

2000	Gore				Bush			
	Oppose	Mean	Favor	Diff F-O	Oppose	Mean	Favor	Diff F-O
SD	.89	.95	.96	+0.07	.11	.05	.04	-.07
WD	.78	.89	.92	+0.14	.22	.11	.08	-.14
LD	.59	.77	.83	+0.24	.41	.23	.17	-.24
I	.19	.34	.44	+0.25	.81	.66	.56	-.25
LR	.07	.13	.20	+0.13	.93	.87	.80	-.13
WR	.02	.04	.07	+0.05	.98	.96	.93	-.05
SR	.01	.01	.02	+0.01	.99	.99	.98	-.01

2004	Kerry				Bush			
	Oppose	Mean	Favor	Diff F-O	Oppose	Mean	Favor	Diff F-O
SD	.97	.98	.99	+0.02	.03	.02	.01	-.02
WD	.83	.88	.93	+0.10	.17	.12	.07	-.10
LD	.71	.81	.88	+0.17	.29	.19	.12	-.17
I	.34	.44	.60	+0.26	.66	.56	.40	-.26
LR	.08	.10	.20	+0.12	.92	.90	.80	-.12
WR	.03	.04	.08	+0.05	.97	.96	.92	-.05
SR	.00	.01	.01	+0.01	1.00	.99	.99	-.01

2008	Obama				McCain			
	Oppose	Mean	Favor	Diff F-O	Oppose	Mean	Favor	Diff F-O
SD	.96	.97	.98	+0.02	.04	.03	.02	-.02
WD	.87	.90	.92	+0.05	.13	.10	.08	-.05
LD	.77	.83	.86	+0.09	.23	.17	.14	-.09
I	.45	.53	.59	+0.14	.55	.47	.41	-.14

(Continued)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

2008	Obama				McCain			
	Oppose	Mean	Favor	Diff F-O	Oppose	Mean	Favor	Diff F-O
LR	.14	.18	.23	+.09	.86	.82	.77	-.09
WR	.06	.08	.10	+.04	.94	.92	.90	-.04
SR	.01	.01	.02	+.01	.99	.99	.98	-.01

*Note.* Entries are the predicted probabilities of hypothetical individuals voting for a candidate, depending on their position on a gay rights opinion variable and their partisan identity. SD = strong Democrat, WD = weak Democrat, LD = leaning Democrat, I = pure independent, LR = leaning Republican, WR = weak Republican, SR = strong Republican. The relevant gay rights issues are military service (1992, 1996), protection against job discrimination (2000), same-sex marriage (2004), and same-sex adoption (2008); oppose = strongly oppose, favor = strongly favor. The characteristics of the hypothetical voters are described in the text.

Vote probabilities for Perot in 1992 and 1996 can be found by subtracting the sum of the major party candidates' vote probabilities from 1.00. The difference scores indicate the effect of the hypothetical voter taking one position, strongly favoring a specific gay right, compared to the opposite position, strongly opposing that right.

We can draw two sets of conclusions from the patterns in Table 3. One has to do with the impact of extreme differences in opinion; the other, with the types of partisans who might abandon their party's candidate when he takes positions on gay rights issues that differ from theirs. Regarding extreme differences of opinion, the patterns show that the difference between strongly favoring gay rights and strongly opposing gay rights generally had the biggest impact on vote choice among pure independents or leaning partisans. For example, in 1992 the hypothetical leaning Democrats who strongly opposed allowing gays to serve in the armed forces had a .54 probability of voting for Clinton, compared to a .67 probability among leaning Democrats who strongly favored allowing gays to serve. Support for Bush in 1992 among hypothetical leaning Republicans fell from .69 among those who strongly opposed permitting gays to serve in the military to .51 among those who strongly favored the policy. These differences of opinion generally had smaller effects among weak partisans and barely any effect among strong partisans.

In regard to which partisans might abandon a candidate, the evidence in Table 3 indicates that the Republican presidential candidates were hurt somewhat more than the Democratic candidates by the "defection" of dissenters in 1992 and 1996. Democratic opponents of gay rights voted for Clinton at slightly higher probabilities than Republican supporters of gay rights voted for Bush or Dole.<sup>12</sup> In 2000 and 2004, the relative effects of dissent on voting probabilities clearly favor the Republican candidates; Republican supporters of gay rights voted for Bush at higher probabilities than Democratic opponents of gay rights voted for either Gore or Kerry. The two major

party candidates were hurt about equally—and minimally—by dissenters in 2008.

Table 4 provides another way to examine the electoral impact of voting among partisans who agreed or disagreed with their party's stance on gay rights issues. For the sake of brevity, the table utilizes an additive index composed of the gay rights opinion items available in each year.<sup>13</sup> The table reports support for non-Republican candidates among groups of voters defined by partisan identification and support or opposition to gay rights. Support for the Republican candidate in a given year can be derived by subtracting a table entry (in 1992 and 1996, the sum of the entries) from 100%. The evidence indicates that in the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections, defection among Republicans who supported gay rights was higher (45%, 35%) than defection among Democrats who opposed gay rights (30%, 28%). The reverse holds true in 2000 and 2004: defection among Democrats who opposed gay rights was higher than defection among Republicans who supported gay rights (21% compared to 16% in 2000, 14% compared to 10% in 2004). In 1992 and 1996 defecting Democrats split their support about evenly between Perot (16% in 1992, 14% in 1996) and the Republican candidate (14% in 1992, 14% in 1996). Defecting Republicans slightly favored Perot (25%) over Clinton (20%) in 1992, but in 1996 they strongly preferred Clinton (26%) over Perot (9%). Finally, in 2008 defection among Republicans who supported gay rights (18%) was slightly higher than defection among Democrats who opposed gay rights (15%). These patterns can be understood

**TABLE 4** Vote percentages for non-Republican candidates by position on gay rights opinion index and party identification

	1988	1992		1996		2000	2004	2008
		Clinton	Perot	Clinton	Perot			
Index/Support								
Democrats	88	85	12	92	5	92	92	94
Independents	40	44	46	48	21	47	50	67
Republicans	13	20	25	26	9	16	10	18
Index/Oppose								
Democrats	82	70	16	72	14	79	86	85
Independents	25	30	32	33	11	47	40	37
Republicans	7	5	17	5	4	4	4	4

Source. 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008 American National Election Studies.

Note. Entries are percentages of partisan identifiers supporting or opposing gay rights who voted for the non-Republican candidates. The entries for 1988, 2000, 2004, and 2008 are based on the two-party vote; the entries for 1992 and 1996 are based on the three-way vote that includes Perot as well as the two major party candidates. Democrats and Republicans are strong, weak, and leaning identifiers; independents are pure independents. Gay rights support includes strong and not-so-strong supporters; gay rights opposition includes strong and not-so-strong opponents. The construction of the index is described in the text.

by turning now to a discussion of the broader partisan forces that shaped the impact of gay rights issues in these elections.

## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This study used the theoretical framework of policy voting to examine the impact of opinions about gay rights on voting for major presidential candidates during the period from 1988 to 2008. Analysis of the major party platforms, candidate campaign rhetoric, and news coverage revealed significant variation in the quantity and quality of attention the parties, their candidates, and the media gave to gay rights. The attention was abundant and unambiguous in 1992 and 2004, less so in 1996 and 2000, and least so in 1988 and 2008. The salience of gay issues in the public generally parallels these variations in attention, and once gay rights became more salient in 1992, opinions about one or more of the issues exerted significant effects on presidential vote choice in each election from 1992 through 2008. More often than not, the opinion that had an effect pertained to the gay rights issue that dominated a particular election. The findings reported here remedy the neglect of gay rights issues in the study of recent electoral behavior and provide another test of policy voting theory. I turn now to consider the broader political implications of this research.

What forces shaped the electoral significance of gay rights issues during the period from 1988 to 2008? According to Carmines and Stimson (1989), candidate strategy and external disruptions bring issues to the electorate and influence whether the issues remain on the electoral agenda. Strategic politicians use issues to maximize their power: members of the majority party (Democrats) cling to old issues to preserve their status; members of the minority party (Republicans) search for new issues to improve theirs. External disruptions are forces that originate outside the party system; they present “problems to be solved, opportunities to be exploited” (Carmines & Stimson, 1989, p. 7).

Conservative Republican activists tried to use various cultural or moral issues throughout the 1980s as a way of attracting new supporters (Hillygus & Shields, 2008), but gay rights issues did not enter their repertoire until later, in the 1992 election. Early in the 1992 Republican primary, challengers Pat Buchanan and David Duke expressed their opposition to gay rights at precisely the same time a federal judge upheld the Pentagon’s ban on gays in the military. Getting off to a slower start, President Bush’s campaign eventually adopted “family values” as its theme. The incumbent’s strategists believed that family values issues would help the Bush campaign accomplish three goals. One was to convince right-wing skeptics that George Bush had strong enough conservative credentials; another was to divert attention from voters’ concerns about the economy; the third was to provide a means to

raise the “character issue” against Bill Clinton (Germond & Witcover, 1993; McWilliams, 1993; Quayle, 1994; Quirk & Dalager, 1993).

Gay rights were part of the package of family values that remained central to the campaign through the general election. Bush’s strategists calculated that the gain in support from conservatives would exceed the loss from moderates, but they were wrong. The audience targeted by the family values appeal was not large enough to bring victory to Bush in November (Arnold & Weisberg, 1996), and the strategy alienated independents and moderate Republicans (Germond & Witcover, 1993; Quayle, 1994). In post-election analyses, the 1992 Bush campaign was criticized for emphasizing family values; but if Clinton had lost, analysts might have second-guessed his liberal positions on such issues as gay rights. The difference is that Bush made cultural issues the centerpiece of his campaign. For Clinton, issues such as gay rights were secondary to the economy. Considering that economic issues were much more salient to voters in both parties in 1992, the Clinton strategy was sound.

In regard to dealing with gay rights issues, strategic politicians may have learned two lessons from the 1992 presidential election. One lesson is that taking an extreme position on an issue benefits a candidate only when a majority of voters share the position and take it into consideration when deciding whom to support. The other lesson is that dealing with an issue ambiguously or evasively might be a safe strategy when candidates are unsure of the majority opinion on an issue or think that they cannot adopt a position that will satisfy core supporters in their own party without alienating independents or persuadable voters in the other party.

The 2004 presidential election serves as a reminder that strategic politicians are not the only means of keeping an issue on the public agenda. In the buildup to the 2004 presidential election, the issue of same-sex marriage captured public interest, thanks to widely publicized state court decisions, actions by local public officials, and initiatives in multiple states to ban it. The Bush re-election campaign safely exploited these external disruptions (Hillygus & Shields, 2008), knowing that Republicans strongly opposed same-sex marriage or civil unions, while Democrats and independents were closely divided on these matters.<sup>14</sup> Although scholars disagree about the precise electoral impact of the same-sex marriage issue in the 2004 election, a cautious summary of the evidence is that the issue mattered in some states for some voters, specifically, evangelicals in states with gay marriage bans on the ballot (see the introductory paragraph for citations to the relevant studies). No one claims that Bush won re-election because of the Republican Party’s stand on same-sex marriage, but certainly the strategy did not inflict damage, as his father’s family values strategy did in 1992. It is easy to say the difference is that the younger Bush paid attention to other issues important to voters, especially foreign policy, but the essential point is that the younger Bush focused on an issue on which public

opinion strongly favored the Republican position. Opposition to same-sex marriage in 2004 was considerably higher than opposition to gays serving in the military in 1992.

The 2004 election provided an opportunity for the Republican Party to “forge new coalitions of disaffected voters” by using emotionally charged issues such as gay rights, immigration, and the war on terror to attract voters who felt threatened by what they perceived as the deterioration of a traditional American way of life (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009, p. 64). Subsequent developments strongly suggest that the Republican Party is unlikely to reap further electoral benefits from gay rights issues, at least not in presidential contests.

There are several reasons why this is so. First, as long as voters feel insecure about their economic wellbeing, most of them are unlikely to base their electoral choices on gay rights issues.<sup>15</sup> Second, the American public is steadily becoming more tolerant of gays and supportive of gay rights, even the right to marry, and these trends are especially strong among younger voters, including younger Republican identifiers.<sup>16</sup> Third, recent external disruptions in the form of two Supreme Court decisions favorable to the cause of same-sex marriage (*Hollingsworth v. Perry*, *United States v. Windsor*) and the legalization of same-sex marriage in a growing number of states suggest that the GOP will have fewer opportunities in future presidential elections to exploit gay rights issues for partisan gain.

Finally, the partisan dynamics are shifting. Democrats, both the party elite and the mass identifiers, have become more unified on cultural issues such as gay rights (Martin, 2013).<sup>17</sup> Republicans, in contrast, are increasingly divided over gay rights issues. There are several notable examples of division among GOP party leaders and activists. In the 2012 presidential election campaign, the Republican platform stated the party’s support for “a Constitutional amendment defining marriage as the union of one man and one woman” (Priebus, McDonnell, Hoeven, & Blackburn, 2012). Six months later, over 130 prominent Republicans signed an amicus brief submitted to the Supreme Court in support of striking down Proposition 8 (Brief for Kenneth B. Mehlman, et al., 2013). Although the number of signers is a fraction of the total number of Republican officials, their participation in the brief represents a budding effort to reframe the debate over marriage rights to emphasize individual freedom and conservative virtues rather than moral or religious values. Over 200 corporations signed a separate amicus brief in support of overturning section 3 of DOMA—a rare intervention on a civil rights issue by business interests, albeit one motivated in part by the desire to avoid the administrative burdens associated with DOMA (Brief for 278 Employers and Organizations Representing Employers, 2013). Advocacy organizations backed by wealthy Republican fundraisers and strategists have also entered the fray. One prominent group, the American Unity Fund, works with gay rights organizations to build support for nondiscrimination laws among conservative policymakers (Hoover & Cook-McCormac, n.d.). Finally,



evidence of support for gay rights among some congressional Republicans can be found in recent bipartisan actions: passage of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act in the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (2013), passage of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act (2010), and passage of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act (2009).

Disagreement among GOP leaders and activists undermines the ability of the Republican elite to provide consistent cues on gay rights policies to the mass public. These divisions are beginning to be reflected among the party's own identifiers. Among Republican and Republican-leaning voters, recent reactions to the GOP's official position on same-sex marriage divide almost evenly, with 31% saying the position is too conservative, 27% saying it is not conservative enough, and 33% saying it is about right (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2013).

Given the disagreement among party leaders, activists, and identifiers, the GOP can no longer define a clear line of cleavage between itself and the Democratic Party on gay rights policies. The two major parties are polarized on many issues (Abramowitz, 2010), and Republicans are still collectively less supportive of gay rights than Democrats are,<sup>18</sup> but the GOP is unlikely to be able to deploy gay rights issues to peel Democrats away from their party without alienating a significant portion of its own identifiers who are expressing more liberal views on gay rights (and, of course, liberal independents). The Republican Party is likely to find that a national campaign strategy stressing opposition to gay rights carries more liabilities than benefits. Given these developments, we should not expect gay rights issues to play a role in policy voting during future presidential elections.

## NOTES

1. The party platforms and nomination speeches are available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>.

2. HIV/AIDS, the health issue intimately, but of course not exclusively, associated with the gay community shared some of the spotlight with gay civil rights issues in 1992. Both major parties had briefly mentioned their concern with HIV/AIDS in their 1988 platforms, and they did so again in 1992 (and, with the exception of the GOP in 1996, in each subsequent presidential election platform). But especially notable in 1992 was the inclusion of convention speakers who had contracted the AIDS virus. The Democrats heard from Elizabeth Glaser, who had contracted it in a blood transfusion and passed the virus to her two children, and Bob Hattoy, Clinton's openly gay environmental advisor (Schmalz, 1992). Mary Fisher, a "rich, white, heterosexual and high-caste Republican" spoke at her party's convention, chastising the GOP for regarding the illness as a "self-inflicted plague earned by immoral behavior" (Kelly, 1992b). These speakers helped expand the public's awareness of HIV/AIDS as a general public health issue, rather than one specific to gays or intravenous drug abusers. Because the HIV/AIDS issue is not a matter of exclusive concern to the gay community, I have chosen not to include it in my analyses of the partisan campaigns or voter behavior. My analysis of campaign news shows that the salience of the HIV/AIDS issue diminished between the 1988 and 1992 elections and virtually disappeared thereafter.

3. Levels of agreement were high. The coders initially agreed about whether candidates were explicitly connected to an issue for 449 of the 462 articles that mention at least one gay issue and at least one candidate. The remaining 13 articles were jointly coded by consensus of the two coders. That coding exercise yielded 200 articles that explicitly connect at least one candidate to at least one gay issue. Coders

initially agreed about how to code the content of 182 of them. The remaining 18 articles were jointly coded by consensus of the two coders.

4. Codebooks compiled by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) provide details on sampling procedure, study design, and question wording for the ANES items used in this article. The codebooks are accessible at <http://www.electionstudies.org>. ICPSR bears no responsibility for the analysis or interpretations presented here.

5. It is worth noting that the public's support for each of these rights increased steadily over the period on which my analyses focus. In 1988, 55% of voters favored or strongly favored protecting homosexuals against job discrimination. Support rose steadily to 75% favorable in 2004 and 2008. From 1992 to 2008, the proportion of voters who favored or strongly favored permitting homosexuals to serve in the armed forces increased from 60% to 79%. The notion of allowing homosexual couples to adopt children also gained more support over time: 29% of voters favored or strongly favored the idea in 1992, while 52% favored it in 2008. The percentage of voters who favored same-sex marriage increased only slightly from 34% in 2004 (the year the question was first posed in the ANES survey) to 37% in 2008; but a more notable increase in support for civil unions occurred during that period: 6% of voters favored this option in 2004, while 28% favored it in 2008. These patterns of increasing support for gay rights are consistent with evidence other scholars report (Hicks & Lee, 2006; Lindaman & Haider-Markel, 2002; Loftus, 2001; Wilcox & Wolpert, 2000; Yang, 1997).

6. Opinion about same-sex marriage might also be expected to have a notable effect, but ANES did not provide a measure of opinion about this right for election years prior to 2004.

7. The models of voter behavior specific to American presidential elections usually include the following variables: party identification, ideological orientation, perceptions of the economy, opinions about various issues, and assorted demographic controls. The models may include additional variables to represent factors unique to the hypotheses being tested or the circumstances of a particular election year. The voting behavior literature is too vast to cite here, but interested readers can orient themselves by consulting the foundational work of Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) and a more recent comprehensive work by Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, and Weisberg (2008).

8. Mockabee (2007) examined the effects of an index of various gay rights opinions on presidential vote choice in the elections of 2000 and 2004, and Abramowitz (1997) examined the effects of an index composed of opinions about gay rights and abortion in the 1992 presidential election. Other scholars examined the effects of same-sex marriage opinion in the 2004 presidential election, either as a stand-alone item (Hillygus & Shields, 2005; Lewis, 2005; Mulligan, 2008) or as part of an index of "morality issues" (Knuckey, 2007).

9. Including an abortion rights variable provides some assurance that any effects the gay rights opinions exhibit are not absorbing the effects of opinions about moral issues omitted from the model.

10. I use multinomial logit rather than multinomial probit because the logit model is susceptible to fewer estimation problems, offers more intuitive answers to the theoretical questions raised here, requires less computational resources, and conforms well to the structure of the data. Dow and Endersby (2004) asserted that these are strong arguments in favor of the logit model. A frequent criticism of the logit model is that it assumes the independence of irrelevant alternatives (IIA). Although there are a variety of tests that purport to determine whether the assumption is valid in a given set of data, they yield conflicting and sometimes erroneous results (Cheng & Long, 2007). Current advice indicates that concerns about IIA in the context of voter choice in multiparty elections are exaggerated; under most circumstances, the logit model performs as well or better than the probit model (Dow & Endersby, 2004).

11. This sets up a conservative translation of the impact of gay rights opinions on the probability of voting for a candidate. A respondent who strongly opposes (or favors) one right is likely to oppose (or favor) the others. Taking this into account in the calculation of the probabilities creates even greater differences between opponents and proponents of gay rights than the differences reported here.

12. The comparisons are made separately for strong partisans, weak partisans, and leaning partisans (e.g., strong Democrats who oppose gay rights compared to strong Republicans who favor gay rights).

13. To create the index, each individual opinion item was recoded so that *strongly oppose* = -2, *oppose* = -1, *depends* = 0, *favor* = 1, *strongly favor* = 2. Values above zero are treated as positions favorable to gay rights; values below zero are treated as positions opposed to gay rights. Respondents at the zero point are not included in the analysis. Findings for the individual opinion items are nearly identical to the findings reported for the index, and the index counteracts the conservatism of the single-item estimates reported in Table 3.

14. When asked in 2004, “Do you think it should be legal or illegal for gay and lesbian couples to get married?” 72% of Republicans, 46% of Democrats, and 50% of Independents said, “illegal” (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2013/03/18/gay-marriage-support-hits-new-high-in-post-abc-poll/>).

15. For example, during the 2012 election campaign likely voters consistently told pollsters that “the economy” or “economic issues” would be the factor most likely to affect their vote (<http://www.pollingreport.com/prioriti.htm>).

16. When asked in March 2013, “Do you think it should be legal or illegal for gay and lesbian couples to get married?” 58% of Americans said, “legal,” and 36% said “illegal.” In 2004, 41% said, “legal,” and 55% said, “illegal” (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2013/03/18/gay-marriage-support-hits-new-high-in-post-abc-poll/>). In a poll conducted a few months later, support for same-sex marriage among 18- to 29-year-olds registered at 68%, support among 30- to 44-year-olds, at 54%, support among 45- to 64-year-olds, at 49%, and support among those 65 or older, at 32% (<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/06/06/us/new-york-times-cbs-news-poll-june-2013.html?ref=politics>). Taking partisan identity into account, 52% of 18- to 49-year-old Republicans think it should be legal for gay and lesbian couples to get married, 37% of 50- to 64-year-old Republicans think so, and 25% of Republicans 65 or older think so. The corresponding figures for Democrats in the three age groups are 73%, 73%, and 64% (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2013/03/18/gay-marriage-support-hits-new-high-in-post-abc-poll/>). The usual caveats apply to comparing results from two polls conducted by different organizations at different times.

17. Same-sex marriage is probably the toughest test of support for gay rights. Washington Post-ABC News Polls conducted from 2004 to 2013 indicate that the percentage of Democratic identifiers who think it should be legal for gay and lesbian couples to get married rose from 50% in 2004 to 72% in 2013 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2013/03/18/gay-marriage-support-hits-new-high-in-post-abc-poll/>). Among high-profile Democratic elites, President Barack Obama, former Presidents Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter, Vice President Joe Biden, former Vice Presidents Al Gore and Walter Mondale, and 49 of the 52 Democratic U.S. Senators in the 113th Congress have stated their support for same-sex marriage.

18. In March 2013, 34% of Republicans said they think it should be legal for gay and lesbian couples to get married; 72% of Democrats said so (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2013/03/18/gay-marriage-support-hits-new-high-in-post-abc-poll/>). Same-sex marriage has been the leading topic in recent surveys of opinion on gay rights, but there are more traditional civil rights issues that elicit greater support from Republicans. The 2008 ANES survey, for example, shows that 66% of strong, weak, or leaning Republican identifiers supported or strongly supported laws that protect gays against job discrimination; 34% opposed or strongly opposed such laws. For comparison, 76% of strong, weak, or leaning Democratic identifiers supported or strongly supported such laws; 24% opposed or strongly opposed them.

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## APPENDIX

### Presidential vote choice

“How about the election for President? Did you vote for a candidate for President? Respondents who voted were then asked, “Who did you vote for?”

### Opinions about gay rights

“Do you favor or oppose laws to protect homosexuals against job discrimination? Do you favor (oppose) such laws strongly or not strongly?”

“Do you think homosexuals should be allowed to serve in the United States Armed Forces or don’t you think so? Do you feel strongly or not strongly that homosexuals should (not) be allowed to serve in the United States Armed Forces?” (included in all but 1988 survey)

“Do you think gay or lesbian couples, in other words, homosexual couples, should be legally permitted to adopt children? Do you feel strongly or not strongly that homosexual couples should (not) be legally permitted to adopt children?” (included in all but 1988 and 1996 surveys)

“Should same-sex couples be allowed to marry, or do you think they should not be allowed to marry? (included only in 2004 and 2008 surveys)

### Opinion about abortion rights

“There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years. Which one of the opinions on this page best agrees with your view? You can just tell me the number of the opinion you choose.” The options are “By law,



abortion should never be permitted,” “The law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest or when the woman’s life is in danger,” “The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman’s life but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established,” “By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.”

#### Opinions about welfare

Index composed of three items (Alpha coefficients, 1988 – 2008 = .61, .63, .68, .59, .72, .70):

“Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education in order to reduce spending. Other people feel it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending. And of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between . . . Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this?”

“There is much concern about the rapid rise in medical and hospital costs. Some people feel there should be a government insurance plan which would cover all medical and hospital expenses for everyone. Others feel that all medical expenses should be paid by individuals, and through private insurance plans like Blue Cross or other company paid plans. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this?”

“Some people feel the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. Others think the government should just let each person get ahead on their own. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this?”

#### Opinions about race

Index composed of up to three items (Alpha coefficients, 1988–2008 = .67, .66, .58, .68, .67, .70):

“Some people say that because of past discrimination, blacks should be given preference in hiring and promotion. Others say that such preference in hiring and promotion of blacks is wrong because it gives blacks advantages they haven’t earned. What about your opinion—are you for or against preferential hiring and promotion of blacks?”

“Some people feel that the government in Washington should make every effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks. Others feel that the government should not make any special effort to help blacks because they should help themselves. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this?” (item phrased as “blacks and other minorities” in 1988 survey)

“Should federal spending be increased, decreased, or kept about the same on programs that assist blacks?” (not included in 1996 survey)

#### Opinion about defense spending

“Some people believe that we should spend much less money for defense. Others feel that defense spending should be greatly increased. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?”

#### National economy

“How about the economy. Would you say that over the past year the nation's economy has gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse?” Respondents who answered “better” or “worse” were then asked, “Would you say much better (worse) or somewhat better (worse)?”

#### Party identification

“Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?” Respondents who named a party were then asked, “Would you call yourself a strong Democrat (Republican) or a not very strong Democrat (Republican)?” Respondents who claimed independence were asked “Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party or to the Democratic Party?”

The resulting summary is coded into seven categories ranging from strong Republican to strong Democrat, with two additional categories for respondents who affiliate with a minor party or declare themselves apolitical. Respondents in the additional categories were coded as missing.

#### Political ideology

“We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?”

#### Religiosity

Index composed of three items (Alpha coefficients, 1988 – 2008 = .81, .80, .80, .82, .82, .81):

“People practice their religion in different ways. Outside of attending religious services, do you pray several times a day, once a day, a few times a week, once a week or less or never?”

“Lots of things come up that keep people from attending religious services even if they want to. Thinking about your life these days, do you ever attend religious services, apart from occasional weddings, baptisms or funerals?” Respondents who said, “no” are coded “never” in the follow up

question “Do you go to religious services every week, almost every week, once or twice a month, a few times a year, or never?”

“Do you consider religion to be an important part of your life, or not?” Respondents who answered “no” are coded as “no guidance” in the follow up question “Would you say your religion provides some guidance in your day-to-day living, quite a bit of guidance, or a great deal of guidance in your day-to-day life?”

#### Distrust government

Index composed of four items (Alpha reliability coefficients are .62 (1992) and .59 (1996):

“How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right – just about always, most of the time or only some of the time?”

“Do you think that people in the government waste a lot of money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don’t waste very much of it?”

“Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?”

“Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked?”