

Explaining the Growing Support for Gay and Lesbian Equality Since 1990

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Abstract

Since 1991, public acceptance of gays and lesbians has grown dramatically. A question asked in the NORC General Social Surveys shows that from 1973 through 1991, 70 to 78 percent of the public thought that sexual relations between two adults of the same sex were always wrong. By 2004, that number had fallen to 57 percent. Other surveys show similar declines in anti-homosexual opinions. What explains this trend?

We use two approaches to explain changing attitudes toward gays and lesbians using data from the NORC General Social Surveys. First, we conduct cohort analyses showing that both generational replacement and period effects are having substantial impacts. That is, since 1991 older, less tolerant generations of Americans have been dying and being replaced by younger, more tolerant Americans, and all age groups have been becoming more tolerant. Second, we pool cross-sectional survey data to model the growing public acceptance of gays and lesbians, and we show how the tolerance of various groups has changed over time.

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One of the most sensational public policy issues confronting policymakers and voters at both the state and federal levels during the last few election cycles has been gay marriage. With many states passing constitutional amendments defining marriage as between ‘one man and one woman,’ and with George W. Bush and his fellow Republicans calling for a federal constitutional amendment banning gay marriage,¹ homosexual relationships have once again been thrust into the political spotlight, joining abortion as a highly successful wedge issue in what some have referred to as America’s “Culture Wars.”²

Despite the rise of anti-gay rhetoric from conservative politicians, polling data show a trend of increasing tolerance for gay relationships.³ Since the early 1990s public acceptance of gays and lesbians has grown dramatically. Beginning in 1991, data from the World Values and General Social surveys have indicated a trend of growing tolerance toward homosexual relations. The question asked in the General Social Surveys is, “What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex - do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?”⁴ As figure 1 shows, from 1973 through 1991, 70 to 78 percent of the public thought that sexual relations between two adults of the same sex were always wrong. Then acceptance of gays and lesbians began to grow. By 2004, the number saying that homosexual relations were always wrong had fallen to 57 percent. What explains this trend?

[Figure 1 here]

Our paper seeks to explain the trend of growing tolerance for homosexuals in two ways. First, we test three possible explanations: the life-cycle, generational-replacement, and period-effects theories of changing public opinion in an effort to understand attitudinal movement on this issue. Second, we estimate a set of probit models to see group attitudes have been changing over time.

¹ As of July 2008, 41 states had either a state statute or constitutional amendment prohibiting same-sex marriage. Nonetheless, conservative groups have joined George Bush in calling for a federal constitutional amendment as protection against a possible future Supreme Court ruling overturning these state measures (see the Heritage Foundation, Family Research Council, American Conservative Union, and Republican National Committee, amongst others).

² The term ‘culture war’ is most (in)famously credited to the unsuccessful presidential candidate Pat Buchanan, who said during his speech at the 1992 Republican National Convention that, “There is a religious war going on in this country, a cultural war as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself, for this war is for the soul of America.” For a nice discussion using General Social Survey and National Election Study data refuting the contention that America is indeed in a “culture war” see Fiorina 2006.

³ In a nationwide Quinnipiac University poll of 1,783 registered American voters, 55% indicated opposition to gay marriage, 36% support it, and 9% were unsure. On the issue of a federal constitutional amendment banning gay marriage, the results are almost inverted, with only 38% supporting such an amendment and 56% opposed, and the remaining 6% unsure. The poll was administered between July 8th and 13th, 2008, with a margin of error of $\pm 2.3\%$ (www.pollingreport.com, “Same Sex Marriage/Gay Rights”).

⁴ Davis, James A., Tom W. Smith and Peter V. Marsden. *Final 2006 GSS Codebook*. March 2007. General Social Survey, National Opinion Research Center. July 15, 2008. www.norc.org/GSS+website. Path: Codebook. The question in this example is number 219 in the 2006 GSS Codebook. The variable is identified as HOMOSEX.

Lifecycles and Generations

Observing opinion trends is one thing; explaining them is another. Many previous studies describe trends in public opinion about gay and lesbian issues. Most of these studies have point to demographic changes, in particular age and education, as explanations for growing tolerance of homosexuality and homosexual relations (Bobo and Licari 1989; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2005; Loftus 2001; Treas 2002; Woods and Barkowski 2004). Additionally, while a number of studies find significant intra-cohort changes in the levels of tolerance displayed toward social issues such as nonmarital and homosexual relations (Anderson and Fetner 2008; Davis 1992; Treas 2002), some evidence suggests that the liberalization of social attitudes within cohorts, while accounting for a small but cumulative effect since the end of World War II, is actually declining in magnitude (Davis 1992). Nonetheless, as Ferris (2000) points out, despite a liberalization of public attitudes, homosexual relations have not received widespread approval in America. The public has formed “bi-polar positions” in favor of, or opposition to, various gay and lesbian issues such as gay marriage and gay adoptions. Anderson and Fetner (2008), as well as others, suggest that the framing of gay and lesbian issues has a significant effect on public opinion. Higher levels of support are found for questions framed in terms of civil liberties and anti-discrimination than for questions framed around purely social concerns (Loftus 2001; Treas 2002). Anderson and Fetner speculate that political events such as the AIDS crisis, along with its attendant gay and lesbian activism, and a growing popular media presence by gays and lesbians, have all contributed to a reframing of the public discourse, leading to the growing levels of tolerance we see in recent data.

Most of the existing public opinion research on gay and lesbian attitudes examines change within and between age cohorts, and attempts to explain attitudinal changes as either the result of generational change (when attitudes differ between age cohorts), or as the result of life-cycle change (when attitudes shift within a cohort over time). Generational and life-cycle change are the two most popular explanations of changing public opinion. The life-cycle explanation is that aging causes people’s opinions to change – usually trending toward more conservative views as individuals age. The generational explanation is that people’s opinions generally do *not* change as they get older. Instead as older generations die off and are replaced by younger people, public opinion as a whole comes to resemble the views of successive younger generations (Cutler and Kaufman 1975; Davis 1992; Firebaugh and Davis 1988; Quillan 1996; Wilson 1994). Both models of change are relevant here because GSS data indicate that the young generally hold more tolerant views of homosexuality than their elders.

The age gap raises two possibilities. If the life-cycle model were correct, aging would have very little to do with changes in overall public opinion. That is, if the young start off as tolerant of homosexuality, but as they grow older come to adopt the more intolerant attitudes of their elders, the result would be no net change in opinion over time. If the generational model were correct, however, a good deal would change. Older, less-tolerant generations would die off and be replaced by younger, more-tolerant generations, causing society as a whole to become more strongly tolerant of homosexuality. This would help explain the decreasing levels of intolerance and give us a basis for predicting that tolerance for homosexual relations will continue to spread for the foreseeable future. We now examine each of these explanations in turn.

The Life-Cycle Explanation

The life-cycle argument, that people become more conservative as they age may sound attractive, but the evidence for it has always been thin. Children and teenagers of the 1960s who were brought up believing in racial equality did not become racial bigots as they grew older. The social scientists who considered the model in the 1950s and 1960s, however, regarded life-cycle explanations of attitude change a serious possibility because they lacked the data essential to test the model – repeated public opinion surveys asking identical questions over many years. In relation to the issue we are exploring that problem is now moot, as the General Social Surveys have been asking questions about homosexuality since 1973.

The best examination of life-cycle effects comes from Mayer (1992), who uses time series data on a wide range of topics. Mayer argues that any life-cycle effects would have two characteristics – they must be correlated with age, and the opinions of the youngest generation must consistently move in the direction of the older generation. In his study, Mayer finds only three sets of questions with life-cycle effects – attitudes toward the income tax, welfare, and premarital sex.⁵ Understandably, in all three cases the life conditions of the young and the old generally differ on these three issues in ways which explain the changes. Both income and taxes tend to rise over people's lifetimes until retirement, when they fall. People's opposition to income taxes follows the same path. Similarly, the young and old are more likely to receive welfare than the middle aged, and consequently the young and old are more likely to look favorably on welfare. Finally, the life cycle in opinions about premarital sex can be explained by observing that college-aged people are more likely to be enthusiastic about the idea of premarital sex than are older people who have teenage children. In short, we find life-cycle effects only where there are changes over people's lives having obvious, direct connections to opinions. According to Mayer though, these obvious age-attitude connections are rare.

We now turn to a search for life-cycle changes in the attitudes toward homosexual relations. As Mayer explains and we have noted, for the life-cycle explanation to hold, two patterns must appear in public opinion survey data. First, because the model claims that aging affects opinions, there must be a strong, consistent relationship between age and opinion. In the case of most attitudes toward homosexuality, this is true. The young are generally more tolerant than the old. Second, individual cohorts – people born in a particular span of years – must change over time in the direction of their elders. That is, if we use a series of public opinion surveys conducted once every ten years to follow the opinions of everyone born between, say, 1950 and 1959, we should find that they abandon their youthful tolerance as they grow older. The data below in table1 allow us to look for both those patterns in attitudes toward homosexual relations by age cohorts.

[Table 1 here]

Table 1 shows attitudes toward homosexual relations. The sample is divided into nine cohorts, or age groupings, which are identified in the leftmost column. The first cohort consists of people born between 1983 and 1990; the next comprises people who were born between 1974

⁵ An important distinction would need to be made here: if a respondent equates homosexual sex with pre-marital sex – either because a respondent opposes gay marriage, or because such marriage is prohibited by law – then attitudes regarding homosexual relations are likely to be affected.

and 1982; and so forth. The second column indicates how old these people were at the time of the first survey in 1991: The first cohort was from one to eight years, the second from nine to seventeen, the third from eighteen to twenty-six. This third cohort is the first one to be included in the 1991 survey, because the survey naturally included only voting-age respondents. The percentages of those who feel that homosexual relations are always wrong are shown in the eight columns on the right.

Reading down the 1991 column, despite a dip into the mid 60 percent range by the thirty-six to forty-four year old cohort, we see that levels of intolerance toward homosexual relations are fairly high. Seventy percent of relatively young respondents, those between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, reported that homosexual relations are always wrong. These high levels of intolerance toward homosexual relations continues to increase with age beginning with the cohort born between 1938 and 1946, reaching a high of 90 percent with the final cohort, the group born before 1920. Reading across the rows however, we see that the young do not abandon their (relatively) youthful tolerance as they grow older. In 1991, 71 percent of those born between 1965 and 1973 responded that homosexual relations were always wrong. By 1993 that number had dropped by more than 10 points to only 60 percent, and by 2000 to just over 50 percent. This pattern is repeated in all the age cohorts. Every group, with the exception of those born prior to 1920, becomes less intolerant as it ages from 1991 to 1998.

By the 2000 survey we see some fluctuation in some of the cohorts, with levels of intolerance rising in a number of the cohorts in 2000, dropping again in 2002, and then rising again in the 2004 survey. We speculate that these spikes may have been driven by the anti-gay marriage discourse during the 2000 and 2004 presidential election cycles. Most notably, George W. Bush's 2004 reelection campaign promised a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage, and a number of states experienced initiative campaigns attempting to define marriage as only being between a man and a woman. Interestingly, older cohorts, beginning with those born between 1947 and 1955, all saw decreasing levels of intolerance.⁶ Nonetheless, all cohorts, beginning in 1991, saw an increase in tolerance toward gay relations, with the greatest decreases in intolerance in the 1947 to 1955, 1938 to 1946, and 1929 to 1937 cohorts, all of whom experienced decreases of anywhere from 17 to 21 percent between the 1991 and 2004 surveys. So, instead of a life cycle, we see the opposite in these data – people becoming more tolerant toward homosexual relations as time passes. Contrary to conventional wisdom, as they grow older, the young do not become more like their parents – they become less like them.

The evidence presented here clearly points to the conclusion that the life-cycle model does not explain changes in attitudes about homosexual relations. Considering the general trend away from public support for gay marriage, both in California and nationwide, this finding is hardly surprising. Other forces are clearly at work.

More generally, the life-cycle explanation seems to be a candidate for folk wisdom – a myth that persists despite scientific findings because it fills a social need. Older people who hold more conservative views no doubt feel frustrated by the fact that their children's generation

⁶ All of which presents an interesting paradox: since we know that older citizens vote in greater numbers than those who are younger, and are also more likely to follow news and political campaigns, what explains the trend in younger voters? We hope to answer this question in later research.

disagrees with them. The folk wisdom that people grow more conservative as they grow older and wiser is surely comforting to them. It allows the older generation to say, “When you grow up, you’ll come around to our point of view.” It may be comforting, but it is not true.

The Generational-Replacement Explanation

An alternative to the life-cycle model is the generational-replacement explanation, which rests on the assumption that people’s opinions generally do not change over time. In this view, because of generational replacement – older cohorts dying off and younger cohorts entering the adult population – public opinion as a whole moves in the direction of the young. In some areas, we know that the generational model explains change. As an example, consider the increase in the average level of education. Almost all Americans complete their formal education by the time they are in their mid-twenties. Early in the twentieth century, most people went no further than high school. Following World War II, there was a huge increase in the number of people going on to college. The Vietnam War years saw even more students continuing through college, older Americans with fewer years of school were dying off. In effect, well-educated young people were replacing poorly educated old people, causing the average level of education to rise.

Our question about attitudes regarding homosexuality, then, is whether they follow the same pattern as education. On the surface, the generational explanation is at least consistent with the trend in attitudes of decreasing intolerance toward homosexual relations. The young are more tolerant than the old, which matches the decreasing intolerance in the entire population. Are people’s attitudes fairly stable over time? Is some of the increasing acceptance of homosexuality explained by the fact that each younger generation is more tolerant than the previous one?

To test the generational model, we examine a series of public opinion surveys over time. In this case, we look to see how opinion would change if there were no generational replacement over time. The trick to doing this is to take a pair of polls (conducted years apart) and statistically weigh the results of the second poll so that it reflects the population of the first. The data in table 2 do just that for attitudes toward homosexual relations.

[Table 2 here]

The first two columns of table 2 show our age cohorts again. The third column shows the percentage of the 1991 in each cohort. The first entry, for example, shows that 14 percent of the population was born from 1965 to 1973. The next column shows the opinions of those people in 2004. Of course, by 2004 there was a new generation of young adults, but in order to see what opinion would have been, we count the opinions of the 1965-1973 cohort as being 14 percent of the 2004 population. By weighing opinions offered by the 2004 respondents to match the 1991 population, we see what opinion would have been in 2004 if the makeup of the population had not changed since 1991. We compare this to the opinion of the real 2004 population to see how much of the change is caused by generational replacement. The mechanics are simply a matter of multiplying (or weighing) the opinions of each 2004 cohort by their 1991 population percentages and adding up the results. This is what the last column does.

The conclusion of our analysis in table 2 is that if there had been no generational replacement between 1991 and 2004, about 62 percent of the population would find homosexual relations always wrong – which is about five percent higher than the actual level of intolerance. To put it a different way, from 1991 to 2004 levels of intolerance towards homosexuality dropped from 75 percent to 57 percent - an 18 percent drop (see the Total row in table 1). Generational replacement accounted for about 5 percent of that drop; other factors accounted for the remaining 13 percent.

To sum up: Generational replacement certainly affects public opinion, but the effect in the case of attitudes toward homosexuality is minor. Mayer (1992, 176-78) found that in the case of some measures of environmental attitudes, generational replacement caused larger changes, but never enormous ones. Generational change is a slow, incremental process. When attitudes swing by 20 to 25 percent in less than two decades, generational change can explain no more than a small portion of the change. For a complete explanation we need to look elsewhere.

The Period-Effects Explanation

When social scientists examine changes in public opinion related to age, they normally describe the changes in terms of three causes – life-cycle changes, generational changes, and period effects. Life-cycle effects, we have seen, are theoretically caused by some aspect of the aging process itself; generational effects are caused by the different circumstances in which successive cohorts are socialized; period effects are everything that is left over. In more general terms, period effects are causes of public opinion that affect all cohorts at the same time and produce a general shift in public opinion in some direction.

If, as we have argued, the evidence on both life-cycle and generational effects clearly shows that these two models fail to fully explain the bulk of the change in the opinion on homosexual relations from 1991 to 2004, then we must look for a period-effects explanation. The question is, what caused attitudes to change so rapidly? The general answers are varied: social and political events occurring during this time period. We now move on to another approach to investigating what it was about the American politics and society that changed opinions.

Explaining Change over Time

Fully explaining why attitudes toward homosexuals have changed over time is beyond the scope of this paper; however, we can get a start on the explanation by examining how the attitudes of various social and demographic groups have changed since the 1970s. That is the task we undertake in this section. We begin with a look at how the attitudes of individual groups have changed over time, and we finish with a probit model using the groups as independent variables to explain attitudes.

Bivariate Analysis

From 1991 to 2006, every group we examined became more tolerant of sex between consenting adults of the same gender. The smallest change we found was an increase of seven percent among blacks saying that “sexual relations between two adults of the same sex” was “not a problem at all.” The largest change was an increase of 23 percent in tolerance among people

who identified themselves as liberals. However, groups varied in how much more tolerant they became over time, and in that variation lies an interesting story.

The advocacy groups that are most prominent in the struggle against the expansion of LGBT rights have been Christian conservatives (Boxall 1994; Thomas 2003; Waldman et al. 1993). Previous public opinion studies have also shown that Christians and conservatives are less tolerant than people with other religions or other ideologies (Andersen and Fetner 2008; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Loftus 2001). We therefore begin our examination of groups with a look at ideology and religion. Given the record of advocacy, we expect that conservatives and Christians (or Protestants, as they are coded in GSS data) will show the least acceptance of homosexuality and will change more slowly than other groups. Our expectations are fulfilled.

[Figure 2 here]

We begin with ideology, shown in figure 2. From 1974 through 1987, little changed. Liberals were the most tolerant group; moderates and conservatives held roughly identical—and less tolerant—views. Starting in 1988, a growing number of liberals began to accept homosexuality. Three years later, the same growing tolerance appeared among moderates and conservatives. However, the different groups changed at different paces. From 1990 to 2006, acceptance of gay and lesbian sex grew 14 percent among conservatives, 22 percent among moderates, and 26 percent among liberals. A tolerance gap between the most and least tolerant groups had grown over time.

The same pattern appears among religious groups, shown in figure 3. The 1970s and 1980s were periods of little change. From 1990 to 2006, Protestants became 13 percent more tolerant, Catholics and atheists became 22 percent more tolerant, and Jews became 31 percent more tolerant. In the case of Jews, of course, the sample sizes were quite small, ranging from 16 to 35. However, if we divide our sample into three broad periods—1974-1990, 1991 to 1998, and 2000 to 2006, the same growth pattern appears with reasonably large sample sizes.⁷ In the first period ending in 1990, 43 percent of Jews gave the tolerant response; in the 1990s, 64 percent gave tolerant responses; and in the 2000s, 68 percent gave tolerant responses. In short, the tolerance of the least tolerant groups from the 1970s showed the smallest gains, while the tolerance of more tolerant groups showed larger gains.

[Figure 3 here]

Christian conservatism is most widely spread in the South. We therefore decided to look at regional differences in opinion. As figure 4 shows, tolerance began growing in the 1990s among all groups. With the exceptions of 1974 and 1980, Southerners were the least tolerant group throughout our time series; moreover, their tolerance grew at the slowest pace beginning in the 1990s. The other regional group to stand out from the pack consists of people living in the north central states. As tolerance began growing in the 1990s, these people consistently fall between the South and the rest of the nation. Another way to measure the effects of region is to look at the region in which people grew up. Of course, the region in which one lives and the region in which one grew up are highly correlated. In the case of the South, the Pearson

⁷ The sample sizes were 279, 132, and 98. The growth in tolerance is statistically significant at $p < .01$.

correlation is 0.74. Nevertheless, as we shall show in our probit analysis, both variables contribute to explaining tolerance for homosexuals. Because the patterns of tolerance by people who grew up in various regions are so similar to the data on residence shown in figure 4, we omit the data.

[Figure 4 here]

Previous studies have shown that whites are more tolerant of homosexuality than are blacks (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Loftus 2001).⁸ As figure 5 shows, whites and blacks have not always differed on homosexual relations, but they have since 1991, and the gap between the two groups is increasing with whites showing greater tolerance.

[Figure 5 here]

Tolerance for homosexuals has also been found to vary with marital status (Andersen and Fetner 2008; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Loftus 2001). Trends among people with different marital statuses, shown in figure 6, are about what one should expect. People who have been widowed are the least accepting of homosexuality, presumably in part because they are generally old. Married people are generally the second least tolerant group. Those who are separated or divorced generally are somewhat more tolerant. People who have never been married are the most accepting, presumably because they are generally younger than those who have been married and because gays and lesbians are less likely to be married than others. Again, the tolerance of the most tolerant group, people who never married, grew more than the other groups—from an average of 27 percent in the 1970s to 42 percent in the 2000s. In this case, however, we should point out that because of changing marriage patterns, the size of the never-married group almost doubled from the 1970s to 1990s, from 13 to 25 percent. So the make-up of the group changed as well as its tolerance.

[Figure 6 here]

Women have been found to be more tolerant than men about homosexual relations (Andersen and Fetner 2008; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Loftus 2001). Gender differences over time are shown in figure 7. Here we see that men and women did not significantly differ from 1974 through 1993. Starting in 1994, women were significantly more tolerant than men, although the difference was not very large.

[Figure 7 here]

The final demographic characteristic we examine is education, shown in figure 8. Consistent with many previous studies, the more educated people are, the more tolerant they are about a wide range of issues, including homosexuality (Andersen and Fetner 2008; Jackman 1972; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Loftus 2001; McClosky and Zaller 1984; Stouffer 1955). Unlike the other groups we have examined, no tolerance gap developed over time. That is, the

⁸ The General Social Surveys divide race into the categories of white, black, and other. In recent surveys, the GSS has included a measure of whether a respondent is Hispanic; however, because the question was only recently added to the survey, we cannot use it in our time series analysis.

most tolerant group—that is, those with college and post-graduate degrees—did not grow in tolerance faster than other groups.

[Figure 8 here]

Probit Analysis

We now turn to a pair of probit models explaining attitudes toward sex between consenting adults of the same gender. Because opinions of various groups changed over time, we estimate two models—one for the period 1974-1989, and another for the period 2000-2006. Pooling our data into these two sub-samples allows us to take a look at how opinion has changed from the pre-1990s period to the more tolerant 2000s. Our results are shown in table 3.

[Table 3 here]

We use the variables we have discussed above as explanatory variables. Religion, region, marital status, and race are recoded as dummy variables (see the appendix for coding details). Because the South and North Central states stood out as distinct regions, we use dummy variables for those regions and group the other states together as the baseline category. In addition, because previous studies show the importance of socialization during adolescence (Jennings and Niemi 1974, 1981), we include two dummy variables indicating whether respondents lived in the South or in the North Central states when they were under 16 years old.

Starting at the top of the table, ideology has a substantial, significant influence on attitudes toward homosexuality. Liberals were far more tolerant. Moreover, the impact of ideology significantly increased from the 1970s and 1980s to the 2000s.

Protestants and those who said they were “Christian” were the excluded baseline category for religion. All other religious groups are more tolerant. Catholics were moderately more tolerant. Jews, people with other religions, and people without religions were substantially more tolerant. These differences held in both time periods.

Southerners and people living in the North Central region were significantly less tolerant than those living elsewhere in the country. In addition, during the years 1974 to 1989, people who grew up in the South were less tolerant of homosexuality than those who grew up elsewhere in the country. This did not hold true of people who grew up in the North Central states in either time period. So both being a southerner and having a southern childhood independently contributed to views about homosexuality.

Marital status also mattered in both time periods. Married respondents are our excluded baseline category in this case. Respondents who were never married were significantly more likely to be tolerant of homosexuality, and that tolerance grew over time. Those who were divorced or separated were also more tolerant than those who were married, although this relationship held steady over time. As we suggested in our earlier discussion of marital status, the attitudes of widows and widowers might not significantly differ from those of married people, once the other variables were taken into account. We presume that the older age of widows and widowers explains the results we found in figure 7.

Women were significantly more tolerant of men in both time periods. Although the coefficient grows in size, the difference between the two time periods is not statistically significant.

Blacks are significantly less tolerant of homosexuals than are whites, the excluded baseline. Moreover, the black-white gap in tolerance grew significantly over time.

Finally, education and age also have significant influences, with better educated and younger respondents being more tolerant. Neither of these variables changed over time.

Discussion

Let us summarize our results about change over time. Although most Americans are far from tolerant about homosexual relations, their tolerance has grown enormously since 1990. A little over one-quarter of that growth was the result of generational replacement. Younger, more tolerant people were becoming adults, while older, less tolerant people were dying. The rest of the growing tolerance had other causes. All groups became more tolerant, but the general pattern was that the tolerance of the groups which were the most tolerant in the 1970s and 1980s increased the most. The groups that were the least tolerant thirty years ago changed the least. Finally, the impact of three variables changed over time—ideology, whether a person had never married, and race. The divisions between liberals and conservatives, between the never married and those who did marry, and between white and blacks increased from the 1970s and 1980s to the 2000s. These differences we have found do not really explain why tolerance increased, but they tell us where to look for explanations.

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Table 1. Percent Always Wrong by Year

Birth Years	Age in 1991	1991	1993	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004
1983-1990	1-8							50	54
1974-1982	9-17		57	49	52	42	44	48	51
1965-1973	18-26	71	60	57	50	45	52	44	61
1956-1964	27-35	70	56	63	59	60	58	51	59
1947-1955	36-44	66	61	63	57	51	53	57	49
1938-1946	45-53	79	66	66	62	65	62	62	58
1929-1937	54-62	79	70	78	73	75	70	66	60
1920-1928	63-71	88	86	81	81	75	82	64	81
Pre-1920	72+	90	86	84	80	84	87	91	87

Question: "What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex - do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all"

Data from the NORC General Social Surveys

Table 2. Estimation of Opinion without Generational Replacement

Birth Years	Age in 1991	Percent of 1991 Pop.	Percent "Always Wrong" in 2004	Product
1983-1990	1-8	0.00	54	0.0
1974-1982	9-17	0.00	51	0.0
1965-1973	18-26	0.14	61	8.8
1956-1964	27-35	0.22	59	12.9
1947-1955	36-44	0.20	49	9.9
1938-1946	45-53	0.12	58	6.9
1929-1937	54-62	0.10	60	5.9
1920-1928	63-71	0.10	81	8.2
Pre-1920	72+	0.12	87	10.1

	1.00	62.5
	Actual opinion	57.6
	Estimated opinion w/o generational change	62.5
	Generational change	-4.9

Table 3. Probit Equations Explaining Tolerance for Homosexuality

	1974-1989			2000-2006			Significant Difference over time
	Coefficient		s.e.	Coefficient		s.e.	
Intercept 1	-2.60	***	0.09	-2.29	***	0.13	
Intercept 2	-2.27	***	0.09	-2.03	***	0.13	
Intercept 3	-2.07	***	0.09	-1.89	***	0.13	
Ideology-Liberal	0.16	***	0.01	0.23	***	0.01	###
Catholic	0.11	***	0.03	0.31	***	0.05	
Jewish	0.78	***	0.08	1.02	***	0.15	
No religion	0.66	***	0.04	.77	***	0.05	
Other religion	0.27	**	0.09	.46	***	0.10	
South	-0.26	***	0.04	-.35	***	0.06	
South under 16	-0.17	***	0.05	-.07		0.06	
North Central	-0.18	***	0.05	-.21	**	0.07	
No. Cent. Under 16	0.00		0.05	.07		0.07	
Never married	0.21	***	0.03	.29	***	0.05	#
Divorced-Separated	0.30	***	0.04	.19	***	0.05	
Widow/widower	0.04		0.05	-.01		0.08	
Female	0.11	***	0.02	.23	***	0.04	
Black	-0.25	***	0.04	-.48	***	0.06	###
Asian/Other nonwhite	-0.26	**	0.09	-.33	***	0.07	
Education	0.09	***	0.00	.08	***	0.01	
Age (in decades)	-0.09	***	0.01	-.09	***	0.01	
Sample n	13,167			5,129			
Pseudo R-square	0.11			0.14			

*** p < .0001; ** p < .001

p < .03; ## p < .001 for difference between 1974-89 and 2000-06 equations

Figure 2. Tolerance toward Homosexuals by Ideology

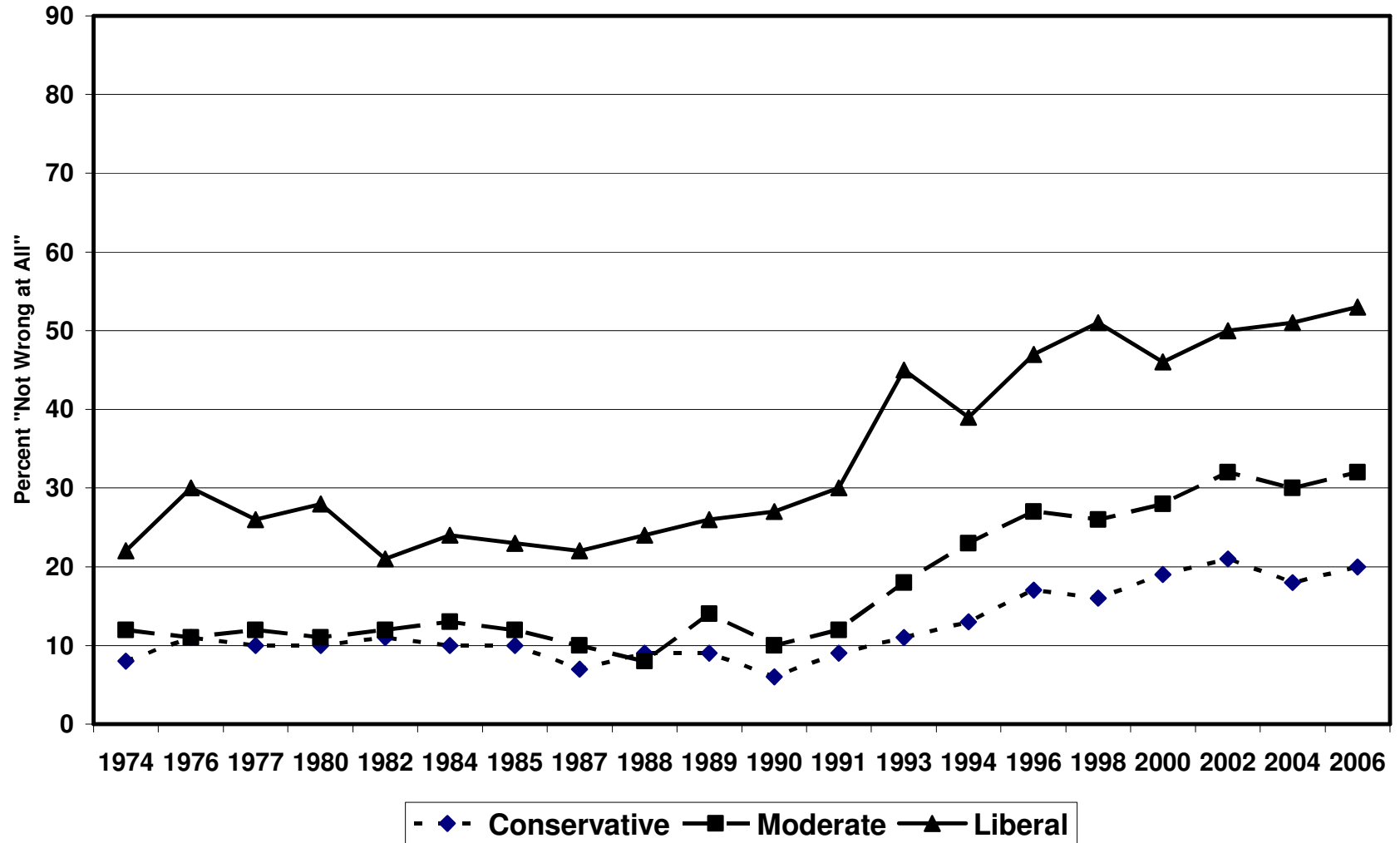


Figure 3. Tolerance toward Homosexuals by Religion

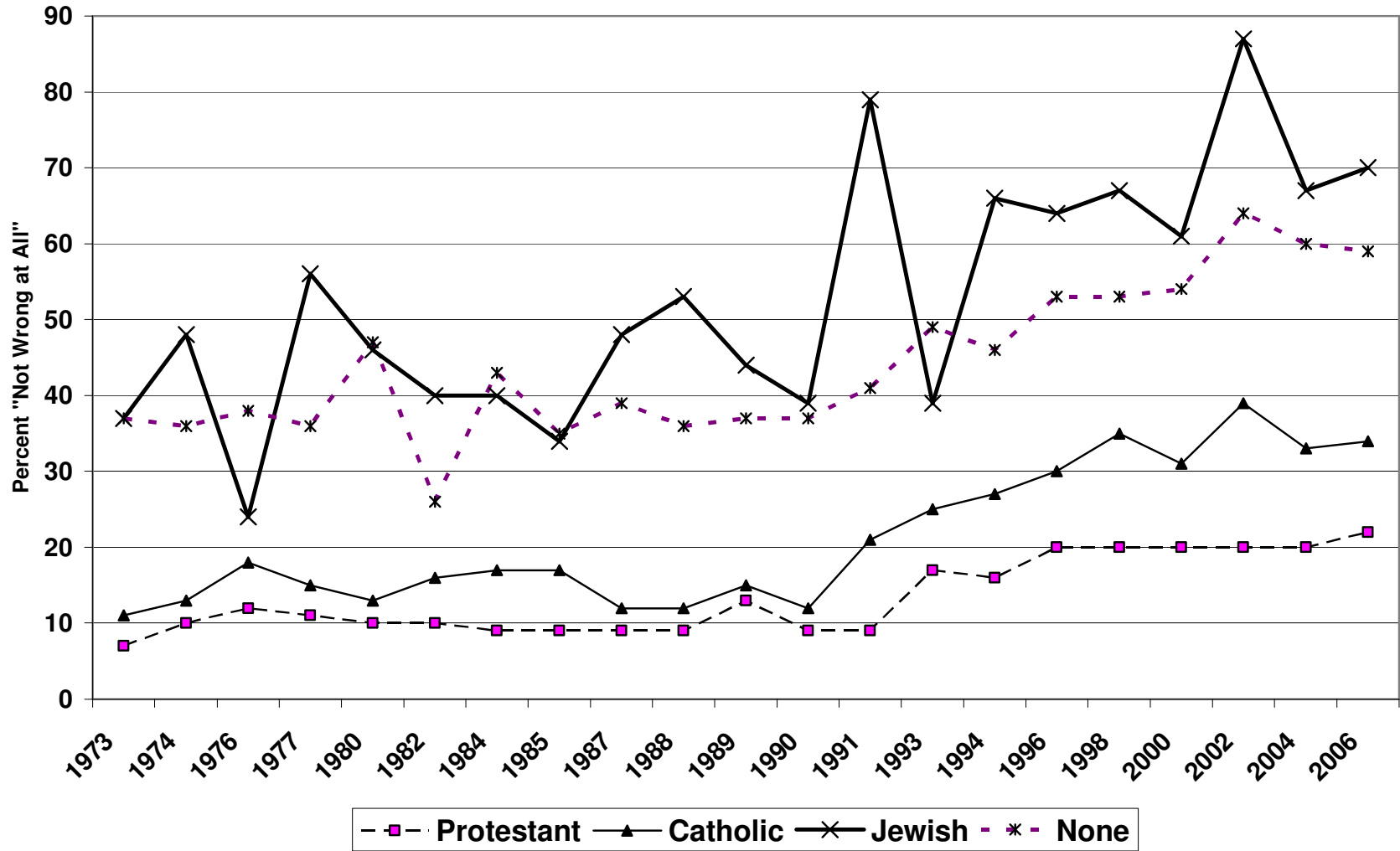


Figure 4. Tolerance toward Homosexuals by Region

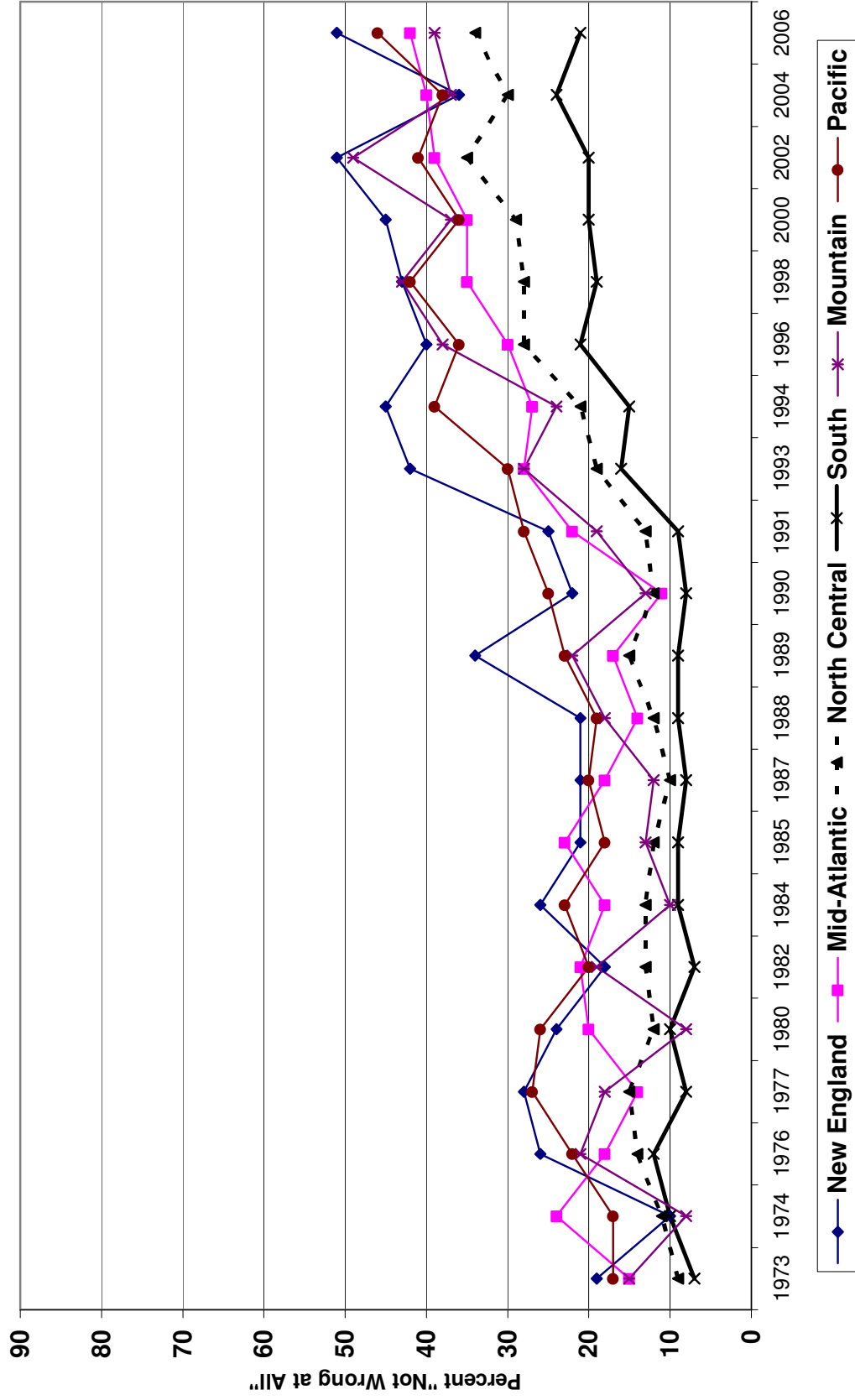


Figure 5. Tolerance for Homosexuals by Race

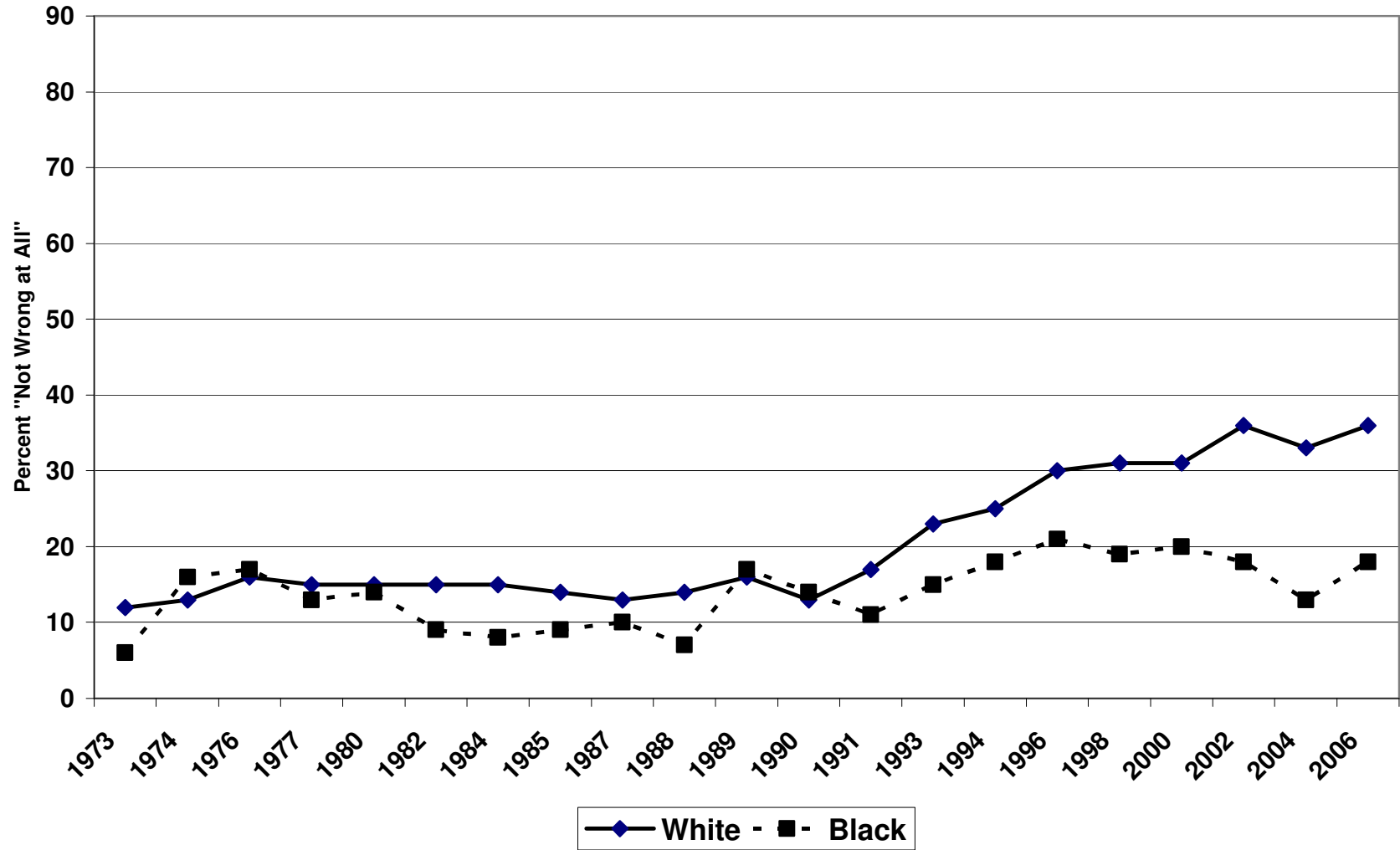


Figure 6. Tolerance of Homosexuality by Marital Status

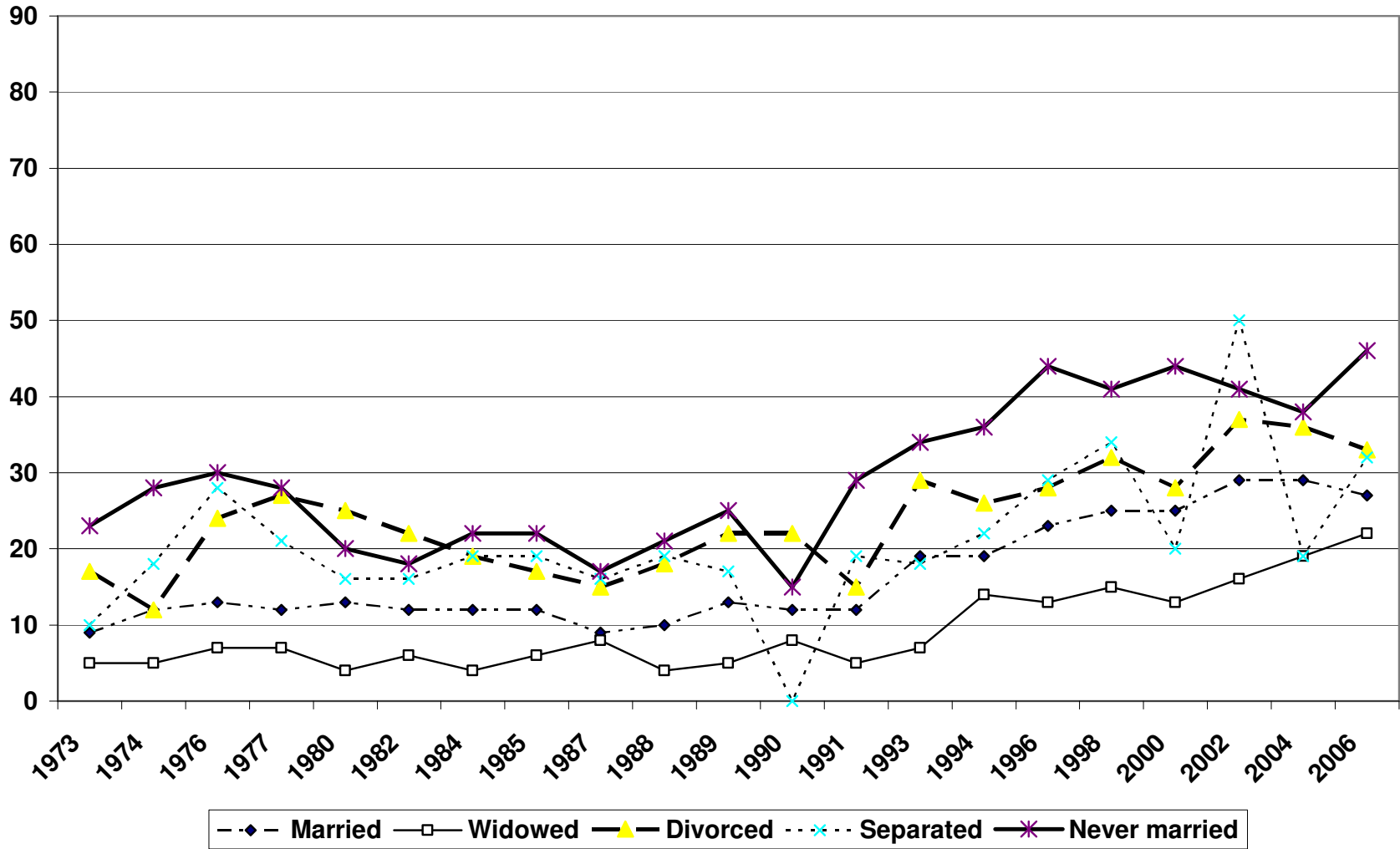


Figure 7. Tolerance of Homosexuality by Gender

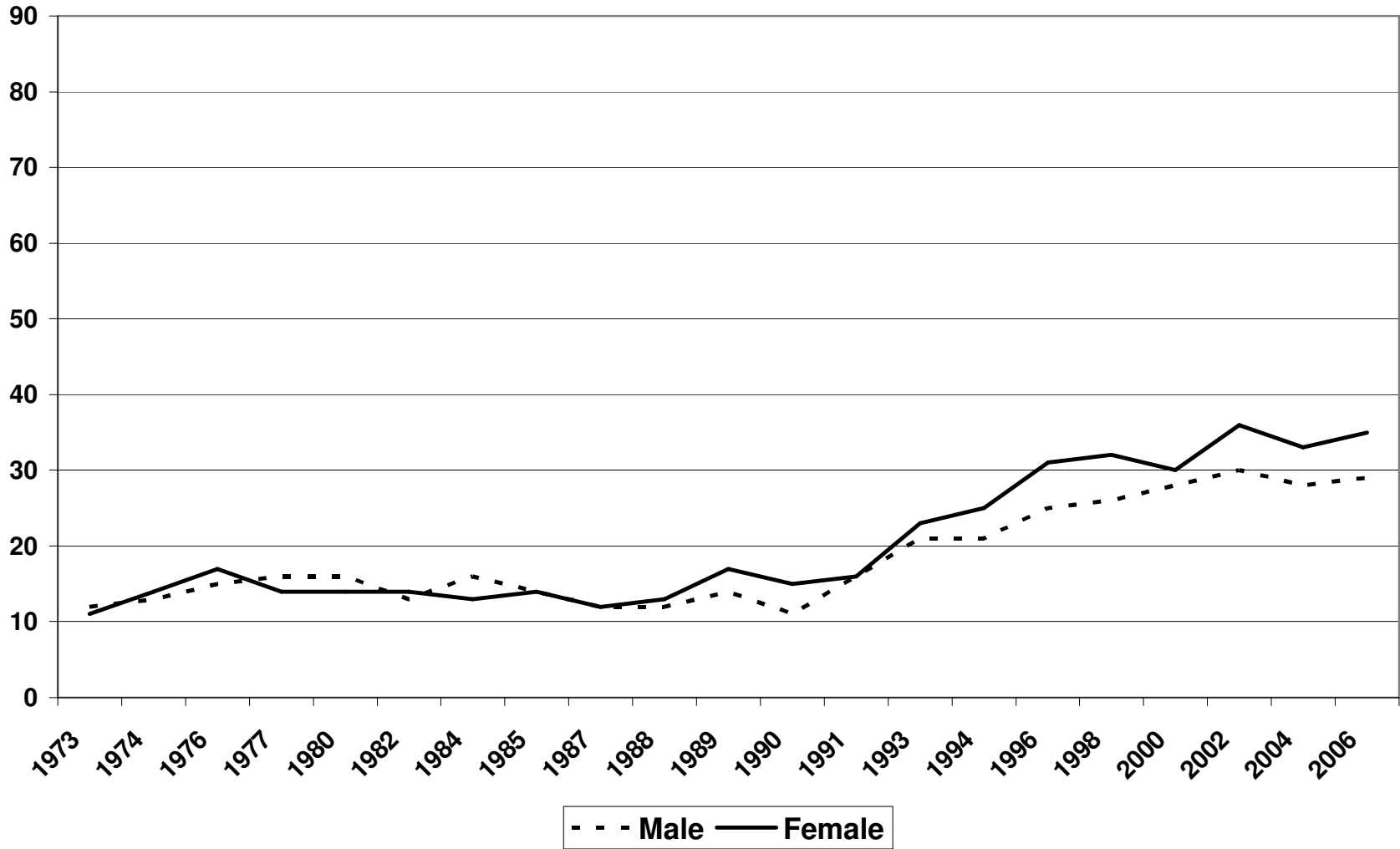


Figure 8. Tolerance by Education

