

Examining Trends in Mexican Public opinion on Gay Rights

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Along with the increasing notoriety LGBT policy issues have gathered in recent years, we have also seen changing trends in public opinion. In Mexico, a predominantly Catholic nation, only 17% of the population was in favor of same-sex marriage in 2003 ([Parametría 2012](#)), but it was only 10 years later that, for the first time, a majority of those surveyed (55%) supported its legalization¹. In 2013, support was even greater for the inclusion of homosexuals in the military (57%), but lower for their right to run for public office (51%) and for adoption by same-sex couples (28%). What explains the variation in this respect?

Several scholars have analyzed public surveys in an attempt to find the right explanation. The theories underlying their work have mainly derived from the (predominantly American) literature on discrimination and prejudice against sexual minorities, which emerged in the 1980s. Studies have shown that LGBT inclusion is more likely among those people who are young and female ([Herek 2002](#)), less religious ([Baunach 2012](#); [Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008](#); [Wood and Bartkowski 2004](#)), less authoritarian, more liberal, and wealthier ([Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008](#); [Whitley and Lee 2000](#)). Scholars have also found that education ([Baunach 2012](#); [Treas 2002](#)) and interaction with gay people ([Barth, Overby y Huffmon 2009](#); [Lewis 2011](#)) all have an important role in shattering the stereotypes typically associated with sexual minorities, thus fostering support for inclusive policies. More recent studies have also revealed that attributing homosexuality to choice tends to be associated with opposition to LGBT-inclusive policies, while the belief that homosexuality is biological tends to foster support ([Haider-Markel y Joslyn 2008](#); [Haslam y Levy 2006](#); [Hegarty y Pratto 2001](#); [Wood y Bartkowski 2004](#)).

How generalizable are these findings? Almost all of the literature on this topic is based on evidence from the US, be it from one specific state or from the whole country. There are very few studies that take these claims and theories outside this nation's heritage, level of economic development, political regime, language, religious tradition, and culture. The following analysis of public opinion in Mexico is an attempt to test these theories in a different context.

The data

To test the argument laid out above, I look at data from a national representative survey carried out from July 13 to July 16, 2013 by Parametría (a Mexican company specialized in public opinion analysis). The survey provides data on 800

¹ Throughout the article, people are said to “support” a certain policy if they answered they “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with its implementation.

people who were at the time 18 or older. The dependent variables are support for gay marriage, support for adoption by same-sex couples, support for the involvement of homosexuals in the military, and support for their right to engage in candidacies (respondents had to answer whether they “strongly disagreed”, “disagreed”, “agreed”, or “strongly agreed” with each one)².

Respondents also provided their sex, age, income—placing themselves in one of eight categories—, and education level—placing themselves in one of eleven categories. People also stated which party they identified with (which I take as a proxy of political ideology), their attribution style—stating whether they thought homosexuality was something people were born with or something people “became”—, whether they thought gay people should be treated differently from everyone else (which I take to reflect prejudice against homosexuals), and whether they thought homosexuals face discrimination in Mexico. Although there were no direct measures on religiosity, I took one question as a proxy: people were asked whether they considered marriage a legal institution or a sacrament (or both); I took those who deemed it a sacrament to be the most religious, those who thought it was a legal covenant to be the least, and those who thought it was a mix of both as a middle category. Finally, there were no questions on interaction with LGBT people, although we can reasonably assume that younger people have had more contact with sexual minorities than their older peers. All variables and their coding are summarized in Appendix 1.

The results

In order to carry out the analysis, I designed four different ordered logistic regression models—one for each dependent variable. Table 1 displays the results of these regressions.

Table 1. Ordered logistic regression models

Variables	<i>marriage</i>	<i>adoption</i>	<i>military</i>	<i>candidacies</i>
<i>Attribution</i> ^a	0.473* (0.108)	0.366* (0.146)	0.312 (0.275)	0.172 (0.540)
<i>Sex</i>	0.417* (0.099)	0.116 (0.640)	0.434 (0.107)	0.166 (0.509)
<i>Age</i>	-0.033*** (0.000)	-0.022** (0.015)	-0.004 (0.641)	-0.013 (0.116)
<i>Education</i>	-0.401 (0.425)	-0.175 (0.723)	0.154 (0.752)	-0.272 (0.577)
<i>Income</i>	2.283*** (0.007)	1.743** (0.041)	2.171** (0.023)	2.535*** (0.001)

² Although questions are centered around ‘homosexuals’, it is worth noting that inclusion in the policies referred would also benefit bisexual citizens.

<i>Awareness of disc</i>	-0.210 (0.667)	-0.589 (0.193)	-0.163 (0.663)	-0.247 (0.574)
<i>Prejudice</i>	-0.333 (0.337)	0.314 (0.437)	-0.655 (0.114)	-0.501 (0.156)
<i>Religiosity</i>	-0.895 ^{***} (0.001)	0.029 (0.923)	-0.496 [*] (0.077)	-0.699 ^{**} (0.012)
<i>Catholicism</i>	0.278 (0.514)	0.322 (0.401)	1.002 ^{**} (0.043)	0.701 (0.148)
<i>Protestantism</i>	-0.613 (0.257)	-0.918 (0.107)	0.359 (0.601)	-0.173 (0.764)
<i>Other religions^b</i>	2.243 ^{***} (0.008)	1.285 ^{**} (0.026)	1.568 ^{***} (0.004)	1.727 ^{***} (0.001)
<i>PRI</i>	0.333 (0.455)	0.277 (0.486)	0.680 [*] (0.078)	0.790 [*] (0.056)
<i>PRD</i>	0.733 [*] (0.092)	0.106 (0.805)	0.118 (0.827)	0.406 (0.382)
<i>Other parties^b</i>	1.856 ^{**} (0.014)	0.802 (0.357)	1.202 [*] (0.059)	0.810 (0.240)
<i>Independents</i>	0.412 (0.282)	0.503 (0.174)	0.248 (0.492)	0.295 (0.399)
<i>cut 1</i>	-1.747 [*]	-0.232	0.093	-0.562
<i>cut 2</i>	-0.429	1.145	1.301	0.742
<i>cut 3</i>	2.979 ^{***}	3.861 ^{***}	4.555 ^{***}	3.767 ^{***}
<i>F</i>	4.26	2.04	2.36	4.28
<i>N</i>	555	553	551	554

All coefficients belong to ordered logistic (ologit) regression models, using the appropriate survey commands in Stata 13. *p* values are in parentheses.

^{*}=*p*<0.10; ^{**}=*p*<0.05; ^{***}=*p*<0.01

a: The significance of coefficients for *Attribution* are interpreted on the basis of one-tailed tests instead of two-tailed tests.

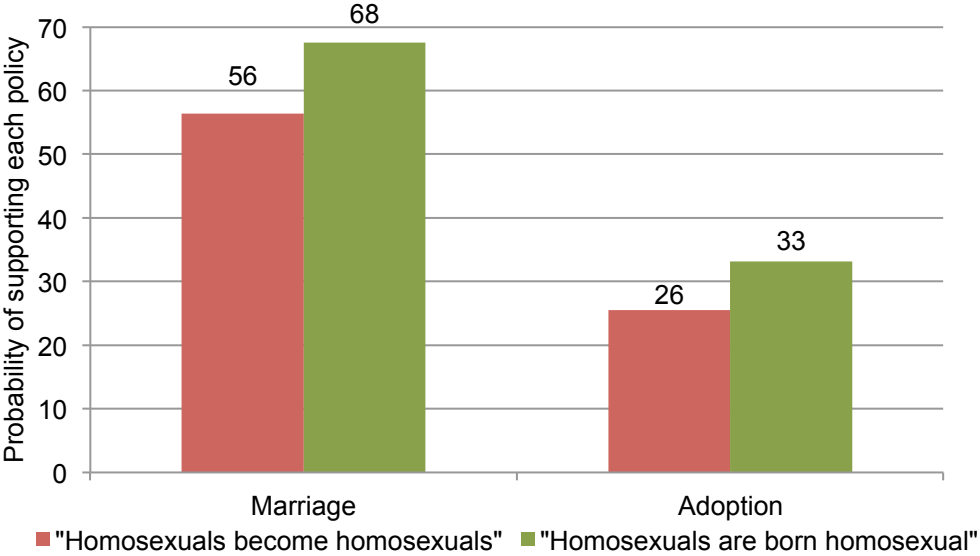
b: Too few people identified with *other parties* and *other religions*, so these variables are excluded from the analysis.

The first relevant result is that biological attribution seems to have a positive effect on support for inclusion only in relation with private matters (i.e. debates about family structures), but not in the case of issues related to participation in government (the military or the bureaucracy). Income fosters support for inclusion for all four policies, while age has a negative effect on support for gay marriage and adoption by same-sex couples. Religious people are more likely to oppose marriage equality and homosexuals having a role in either the military or politics. Females tend to be more supportive of gay marriage than males. Catholicism seems, surprisingly, to have a positive effect on support for inclusion in the military. Finally, in terms of ideology, PRI supporters (the PRI can be considered essentially a center party) are more likely to support LGBT inclusion in public affairs (military, politics) than PAN supporters (the more right-wing party, and the base category in

the models), as are PRD supporters (the more left-wing party) in the case of marriage equality.

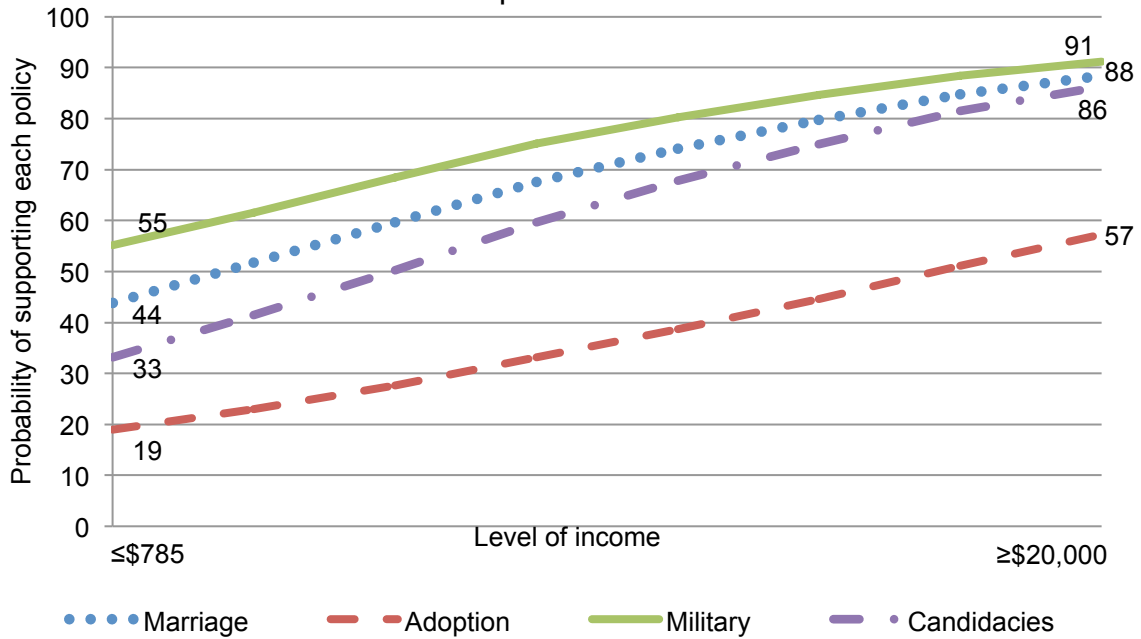
The effects of each variable are different in magnitude. For example, increasing a citizen's age from 18 to 43 (the mean value) makes the probability of supporting same-sex marriage shrink from 74% to 57%, and increasing it all the way to 90 makes the probability 21%. In the case of adoption, a shift from 18 to 43 years old makes the probability of support change from 46 to 33%, and altering the age to 90 makes it only 15%. We can get an idea of the effect of other relevant variables if we make them more visual. In terms of Graph 1, thinking gay people are born gay (instead of thinking they "become" gay at some point in their lives) increases the likelihood that the average Mexican citizen will support same-sex marriage in 12 percentage points, as well as the likelihood that they will support adoption by gay couples in 7 percentage points.

Graph 1. The effect of attributions on support for LGBT-inclusive policies

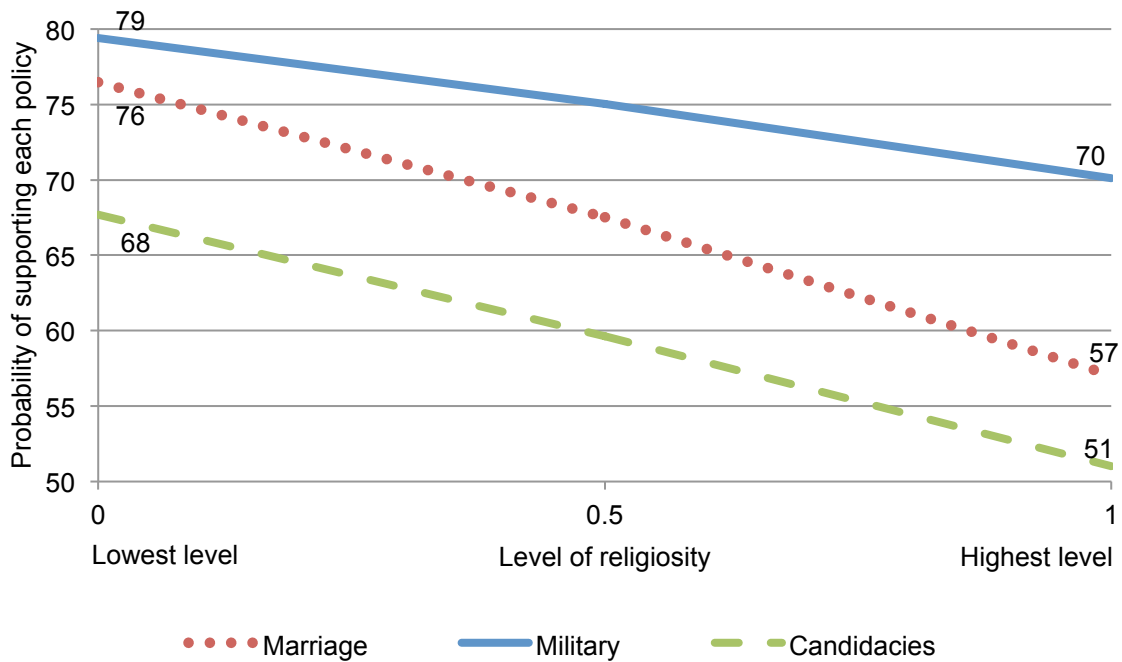


As to Graph 2, a shift from the lowest level of income to the highest has the following effect on the likelihood that the average Mexican citizen will support each policy: for inclusion in politics, an increase in 53 percentage points; for marriage equality, an increase in 44 percentage points; for adoption by same sex couples, an increase in 38 percentage points, and for inclusion in the military, an increase in 36 percentage points.

Graph 2. The effect of income on support for LGBT-inclusive policies



Graph 3. The effect of religiosity on support for LGBT-inclusive policies



Finally, in terms of religiosity (Graph 3), a shift from the lowest to the highest level will have a negative significant effect on the probability that the average Mexican

will support gay marriage and homosexual participation in politics and the military. In the first case, the effect is a decrease of 19 percentage points; in the second, it is a decrease of 17 percentage points; and in the third, it is a decrease of 9 percentage points.

Shaping public opinion

Keeping the previous findings in mind, what can we say about public opinion towards the inclusion of gay men and women in Mexico? For starters, the most important insight is that the explanation for shifts in public opinion is not the same for all policies—therefore, governments, organizations and common citizens aiming to alter public opinion on equal rights will have to follow different strategies depending on the issue they seek to emphasize. It has been proving that public opinion has an influence on the adoption of inclusive policies (c.fr. [Lax and Phillips 2009](#)); we thus need to seek ways to garner public support towards equality in every arena. The “born this way” strategy that has prevailed among activists for several years now may be effective in changing public opinion only in regards to the conventional family structures, but not in relation with more broad political struggles such as the right to be voted for—at least in Mexico.

The issue of political candidacies may be expected to change in the longer term, as it depends more than other policies on two slow phenomena already under way: religiosity becoming less prevalent and economic development. On the other hand, the battles for marriage equality and adoption by same-sex couples seem more likely to benefit from information campaigns based on scientific findings regarding the biological origin of homosexuality. If we think of age as a proxy for contact, interactions between gay and straight people might also be valuable—and these are more likely to take place the more liberal and inclusive society seems. Finally, support for LGBT inclusion in the military may be more difficult to foster; however, as mentioned in the introduction, the willingness to discriminate against sexual minorities in this area is the lowest if we compare it to the rest.

The only relevant factor for all policies is income, which might be a bit discouraging. Theoretically, at least, economic development is deeply tied with democratization levels, and Mexico is currently having a hard time consolidating its democratic institutions (let us look at only one indicator of democratic consolidation: trust in political institutions is at an all-time low, according to LAPOP’s 2012 data). However, the marginal effect of income is big: small increases in this department are associated with big shifts in public opinion.

All in all, the challenges for LGBT inclusion in a developing country such as Mexico are not insurmountable. There is still plenty of room for activists and government

officials to win the hearts and minds of citizens, and some long term processes (e.g. economic development, cohort replacement³) will help along the way. If we look at all the progress we have made in the past few years, there is ample reason to believe this is not yet a lost battle.

Sources

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³ Cohort replacement refers to the idea that older—and, in this case, more conservative—generations will eventually be replaced by younger—more liberal—ones.

Appendix 1. Variables and their measurements

Variable	Survey question	Values
<i>Dependent variables</i>		
Marriage	Should marriage between two people of the same sex be legal?	“strongly disagree”=1; “disagree”=2; “agree”=3; “strongly agree”=4
Adoption	Should adoption by same-sex couples be allowed?	“strongly disagree”=1; “disagree”=2; “agree”=3; “strongly agree”=4
Military	Should homosexuals be accepted in the army?	“strongly disagree”=1; “disagree”=2; “agree”=3; “strongly agree”=4
Candidacies	Should homosexuals run for public office?	“strongly disagree”=1; “disagree”=2; “agree”=3; “strongly agree”=4
<i>Independent variables</i>		
Attribution	In your opinion, are homosexuals born homosexual or do they become homosexual?	0=“become homosexual”; 1=“born homosexual”
Prejudice	Do you think homosexuals in Mexico should be treated as any other citizen or differently?	0=“same as every other citizen”; 1=“differently”
Awareness of discrimination	Do you think homosexuals are discriminated against in our country or not?	0=“no” 1=“yes”
Religiosity	Do you conceive marriage as a sacrament or as a legal contract?	0=“a legal contract” (least religious); 0.5=“both”; 1=“a sacrament” (most religious).
Party Id.	Regardless of which party you have voted for in the past, which one do you identify with?	Dummies for PRI (center party), PRD (left party), Other parties, and Independent voters.
Religions	Religion	Dummies for Catholicism, Protestantism, Others, and None.
Income	Monthly household income	Scale from 0 (less than 785 pesos—around 50 USD) to 1 (more than 20,000 pesos—around 1,500 USD)
Education	Maximum degree of studies	Scale from 0 (incomplete elementary school) to 1 (university studies)
Age	Age	18-90
Sex	Sex	0 if male; 1 if female

Source: Parametría, *Encuesta Nacional en Vivienda*, July 13-16, 2013.