

Anti-Gay Sentiment among Adolescents in Belgium and Canada: A Comparative Investigation into the Role of Gender and Religion

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SUMMARY

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ABSTRACT: Previous research has indicated that opposition toward LGBT rights remains prevalent among Western populations. In this article we investigate the determinants of anti-gay attitudes among adolescents in two liberal democracies, Belgium (n=6,330) and Canada (n=3,334). The analysis indicates that hostile feelings toward LGBT rights are particularly widespread among boys, while the effects of socio-economic status and parental education remain limited. Various religious denominations proved to have a strong and significant negative impact on tolerance, with especially high scores for Islam. Religious practice, too, contributes to a negative attitude toward LGBT rights. The consequences of these findings with regard to tolerance for gay rights among Islamic youth in Western democracies are discussed.

KEY WORDS: Religion, Tolerance, Gay Rights, Youth, Gender, Islam.

INTRODUCTION

Various studies suggest that over the past decades, tolerance of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights has increased substantially in Western societies (Loftus, 2001; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Gibson, 2007; Newman, 2007; Andersen & Fetner, 2008). Lewis (2003, p. 68) notes that from 1973 to 2000, support for LGBT issues rose 10 to 28 percentage points on average in the U.S., which parallels similar increases in other countries (Jaspers, Lubbers & de Graaf, 2007). Despite this increase, homophobia continues to be prevalent in most societies (LaMar & Kite, 1998). Past research has documented the occurrence of acts of physical violence directed predominantly at gay men, mostly involving young male aggressors (Franklin, 2000; Herek et al., 2002). Even in rather tolerant societies like Canada and the Netherlands, violence against gay men remains widespread (Hekma, 2002; Janoff, 2005). In line with classical research, the determinants of homophobic attitudes remain relatively unchanged. In general, men do not only score higher on the presence of negative attitudes toward LGBT groups, they also seem more willing to express these negative attitudes (Kite & Whitley, 1996). While education levels generally have a moderating effect on homophobia, adherence to strict and fundamentalist forms of religion is positively associated to homophobia and anti-gay attitudes (Ellison & Musick, 1993; Sotelo, 2000; Schulte & Battle, 2004; Schwartz & Lindley, 2005; Ford, Brignall, VanValey & Macaluso, 2009). There is even evidence to suggest that religiosity is taking on increased importance in explaining homophobic attitudes (Jaspers et al., 2007; Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009).

In this article, we examine how anti-gay sentiment is distributed among young people in Canada and Belgium. In particular, we will pay attention to the role of age, gender, religious affiliation and religiosity in impacting attitudes toward gay rights activists. We do so because of an increasing concern about the impact of religious values on tolerance of LGBT

groups, especially among Muslims in major Western cities (Hekma, 2002; Yip, 2005). By relying on a large sample of adolescents in both countries, we are able to make distinctions in the analysis to separate out the effects of various religious denominations, like Catholic, Protestant and Islamic faith. A comparison between Canada and Belgium is also of interest because both countries have fairly liberal legislation with regard to gay and lesbian rights, including the legal recognition of same-sex marriage (Kollman, 2007). This article will examine to what extent these tolerant legislative regimes extend to attitudes among youth in these two countries.

(...)

In the CYS, three questions were asked which tap attitudes toward LGBT rights. The first question assesses the degree of agreement or disagreement with gay rights activists. Answers range from 0 to 10, with higher scores indicating more agreement. The average score on this scale was 5.2 (in Belgium) and 5.4 (in Canada), with fairly normally distributions across the range of responses. Two additional questions ask about the prerogative of gay rights activists to hold a peaceful march in the respondent's neighborhood and to talk on public television about their views. The answers for these two questions were dichotomous (yes or no). These questions were included because previous research suggests that an opposition to LGBT rights is a powerful indicator of a more modern form of homophobia (Sotelo, 2000). These three questions show high internal consistency (Cronbach's α is .770 in Belgium and .766 in Canada), suggesting that they are measuring a similar underlying construct. The three items clearly and strongly load on one factor (see Appendix).

For the analysis, a sum scale was constructed with these items. The scale is an additive scale of the three items, which were standardized from 0 to 1. The resulting scale varies from 0 to 3, with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes toward gay rights activists. The average score on the resulting scale is 1.87 in Belgium and 1.91 in Canada. This difference is weakly significant ($p=.097$). Unfortunately, the CYS did not contain any of the more formal scales for homophobia that have been developed within social psychology (Gençöz & Yüksel, 2006; Morrison & Bearden, 2007). However, our interest is in capturing young people's reactions to rights-based questions, and these three items clearly represent salient issues in the current debate. Furthermore, we believe the analysis of these questions is useful in capturing more subtle forms of modern homophobia that are often couched in questions of rights, and is also substantively important given the rights-based claims of LGBT movement(s).

SUPPORT FOR GAY RIGHTS AMONG ADOLESCENTS

Table 1 provides bivariate results by gender and religion across the three gay rights activist questions. The results confirm a number of patterns that have been identified in the literature. First, we observe clear gender differences. Support for gay rights activists is much stronger among girls than it is among boys, and this pattern is similar in Belgium and Canada. If we consider simple agreement with gay rights activists, young women in both countries on average report about .65 on the 0-1 scale, whereas young men report just over .40. Substantively, this suggests that on average, young women tend to agree with the beliefs of gay rights activists, whereas young men tend to disagree. The gender differences are significant at the $<.01$ level in every case, and provide evidence of a compelling gender gap.

The different religious communities also clearly show diverging levels of support for LGBT rights. In general, non-religious respondents are most supportive of LGBT rights, although there is little difference with the Jewish respondents in Canada. The number of

Jewish respondents in Belgium was too small to arrive at any meaningful conclusion. Catholics score lower on these indicators, but tolerance is even lower among Protestant and Orthodox Christian faiths. Across the religious groups, Islamic adolescents show the lowest levels of support. It is worthwhile to note here that the difference between Islamic respondents in Belgium and those in Canada remains quite limited, despite different aggregate differences in the background characteristics of this community in each country.

<Table 1 about here>

With regard to religious practice, the differences are telling: across the three gay rights items, those who do not attend religious services regularly have scores on average that are twice as high as those who attend a religious service regularly. These differences also seem to hold when they are broken down by religious denomination. Figure 1 provides the average scores on the gay rights scale based on religious practice and religious denomination. Clearly, religious attendance has a negative effect on tolerance for LGBT rights across all major denominations. While the intercepts of the graph represents differences in support for gay rights activists across denominations, the slope of the lines confirms a negative relationship of religious attendance across denominations. This relationship appears particularly strong among Protestants and Muslims, while the effect is somewhat dampened for Catholics and especially Jewish believers.

<Figure 1 about here>

Subsequently, we turn to a multivariate analysis using the additive scale for the three questions as the dependent variable (Table 2). A higher score on this scale implies stronger

support for gay rights activists. We run three separate models. In the first model, the analysis is limited to a number of basic background characteristics, including controls for country of survey (Canada is the reference category), having been born outside of the country, gender and parental education (1= at least one parent completed university). We then estimate a model controlling for religious affiliation, where the non-religious and those with an unidentified religion are the reference category. Finally, Model 3 adds in frequency of religious attendance (1-5) as a measure of religiosity, where higher scores indicate more frequent attendance.

<Table 2 about here>

In Model 1, we find a significant gender gap in the expected direction. In line with earlier research, adolescent boys seem to be far less tolerant on LGBT issues than adolescent girls are. In addition to the gender gap, we also find significant effects for parental education and origin, and no significant difference between the two case countries. The education level of the parents has a positive effect on support for gay rights, but the effect seems to be less powerful than that of gender. A breakdown of the parental education variable indicates that a mother's education level seems to play a more important role than a father's education level (results not shown). The standardized coefficient for country of birth, is also significant in Model 1 and suggests that being born outside of Canada or Belgium has a negative effect on support for gay rights activists. Given the different racial, ethnic and religious composition of immigrant communities, it is important to note that country of origin may simply be capturing characteristics of immigrant communities rather than an inherent hostility toward LGBT issues based in the immigrant experience in the culture of one's home society.

We find some support for this contention in Model 2 when dummy variables are included for religious affiliation. Clearly, the inclusion of religion denominations cuts the size of the standardized coefficient for country of origin in half, suggesting that being born outside Belgium or Canada affects attitudes toward gay rights activists largely because of the religious background of immigrant communities. As mentioned earlier, immigrant communities in Belgium and Canada tend to be composed more heavily of Muslim groups than the native population. In the CYS data, a full one-quarter of respondents who were born outside the case countries were Muslim, whereas only six percent of those born within each country were Muslim ($p < .001$). While all religious denominations except for the Jewish religion appear to be negatively associated with support for gay rights activists, the effect is largest for Muslims. The size of the standardized coefficient is greater than for any other denomination by more than double. As is found in previous literature, we also obtain a positive impact of being from a Jewish background on support for gay rights activists.

The impact of religious denomination, and especially being Muslim, is clearly negatively related to support for gay rights. These results hold even after including controls for immigrant status, gender and the education level of both parents, which suggests that religious affiliation has an important independent effect on these attitudes. This is further substantiated by the observation that adding religious affiliation considerably strengthens the model, with an adjusted r-square of .16 in Model 2 compared to .11 in Model 1.

Yet, one possible counter-argument could still be that we are not measuring the effect of an Islamic background as such, but rather the fact that respondents from an Islamic background tend to be more religiously involved than respondents from other backgrounds. For example, respondents from Christian backgrounds report on average 1.9 on the 1 to 5 religious attendance scale, compared to Muslims who report 2.7 ($p < .001$). In other words, there are important differences in the levels of religiosity across religious denominations

which mean part of the denominational effect (and also the immigrant effect), may be due to stronger religiosity among that group. To test for this argument, Model 3 includes a variable for the frequency of religious practice. The inclusion of this variable strengthens the model, with an explained variance of .187. Religious practice, furthermore, proves to be a powerful predictor with a standardized coefficient size almost equal to that of being Muslim.

As expected, including religious intensity slightly diminishes the effect of Islamic background, although it should be noted that the standardized effect of being Muslim remains at a solid .17. This effect is not limited to being Muslim, however, as including religious attendance decreases the size of the coefficients for every denomination except Jewish. In fact, the inclusion of religious attendance causes 'being Catholic' to lose significance. This suggests that those who more regularly attend a religious service, no matter their denomination, are significantly more likely to show intolerance of gay rights activists, as was already shown in Figure 1. At the same time, we still witness a strong and significant negative effect for being Muslim that withstands the inclusion of religious practice. One exception to this pattern is being Jewish. The inclusion of religious attendance actually strengthens the positive impact of being Jewish on support for gay rights activists. Consistent with past research, there appears to exist evidence that being Jewish fosters a more liberal view toward rights of minority groups (Cohen & Liebman, 1997).

Yet, the impact of religious practice and being Muslim must be put in the context of other background characteristics. While the inclusion of these two variables helped to account for differences in support for gay rights activists among those born outside of Belgium and Canada compared to those born within each country, the strongest impact continues to be a gender effect. In Model 3, the strength of the standardized coefficient for being male is -.32. While there may be legitimate concern about immigrant communities' hostility toward gay

rights, an equally important issue for Western democracies continues to be high levels of anti-gay sentiment among young men.

(...)

Table 1: Support for Gay Rights Activists in Belgium and Canada

	Agree with beliefs of gay rights activists (mean on 11-point scale rescaled to 0-1)		Percentage agree: Allow gay rights activists to hold a peaceful march in neighborhood		Percentage agree: Allow gay rights activists to talk on public television about views	
	Belgium	Canada	Belgium	Canada	Belgium	Canada
<i>All respondents</i>	0.52	0.54	60%	60%	73%	76%
<i>Gender</i>						
Female	0.65	0.64	70%	69%	85%	85%
Male	0.41	0.43	52%	49%	62%	64%
<i>Religion</i>						
Catholic	0.54	0.64	62%	64%	75%	81%
Protestant	0.40	0.47	40%	62%	56%	73%
Orthodox	0.46	0.46	56%	54%	67%	71%
Other Christian Religion	n.a.	0.37	n.a.	44%	n.a.	64%
Muslim	0.25	0.28	33%	34%	47%	49%
Jewish	n.a.	0.67	n.a.	78%	n.a.	93%
Other Religion	0.44	0.53	60%	55%	68%	77%
Not Religious	0.58	0.67	65%	73%	77%	82%
<i>Religious Attendance</i>						
At least once a week	0.30	0.28	37%	40%	45%	52%
Less than once a week	0.54	0.59	62%	64%	75%	80%

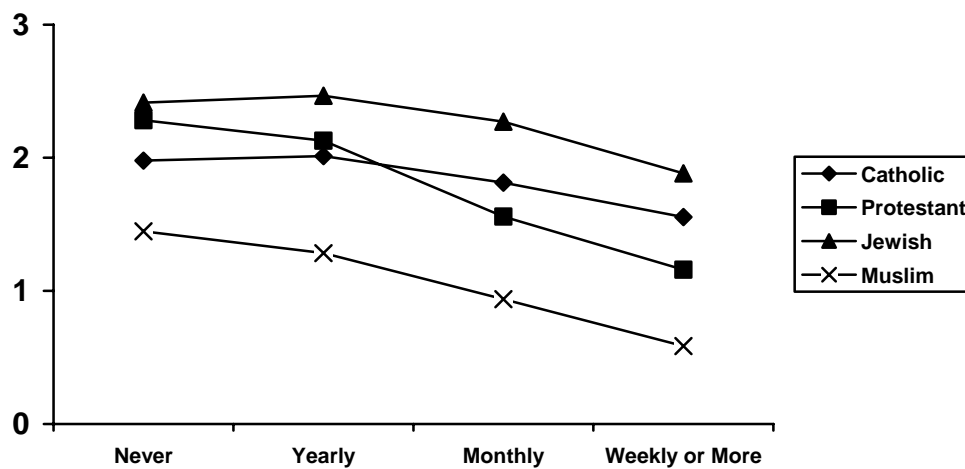
Entries are the mean scores and percentages of support for gay rights activists; n.a.: not present or n<50. Source: CYS (n= 9,664).

Table 2: Impact of Religion, Gender and Religiosity on Support for Gay Rights Activists (OLS)

	Model 1				Model 2				Model 3			
	B	s.e.	β		B	s.e.	β		B	s.e.	β	
Background Variables												
Country: Belgium	0.017	(.03)	0.008		-0.048	(.03)	-0.022 ^a		-0.073	(.03)	-0.034	**
Born outside Canada/Belgium	-0.368	(.04)	-0.115	***	-0.190	(.04)	-0.060	***	-0.166	(.04)	-0.052	***
Male	-0.649	(.03)	-0.308	***	-0.661	(.02)	-0.314	***	-0.674	(.02)	-0.320	***
Parent(s) University Educated	0.188	(.03)	0.087	***	0.174	(.03)	0.080	***	0.186	(.03)	0.086	***
Religious Affiliation												
Catholic					-0.092	(.03)	-0.043	**	-0.034	(.03)	-0.016	
Protestant					-0.324	(.06)	-0.064	***	-0.130	(.06)	-0.026	*
Orthodox Christian					-0.373	(.09)	-0.051	***	-0.305	(.09)	-0.042	**
Other Christian					-0.655	(.07)	-0.111	***	-0.412	(.07)	-0.070	***
Jewish					0.256	(.09)	0.034	**	0.343	(.09)	0.045	***
Muslim					-0.974	(.06)	-0.224	***	-0.757	(.06)	-0.174	***
Religiosity												
Religious Attendance									-0.183	(.01)	-0.168	***
Constant	3.225	(.06)		***	3.240	(.07)		***	3.505	(.07)		***
Adjusted R-Squared			0.112				0.164				0.187	
N			6177				6177				6177	

Note: Dependent variables is the standardized sum scale of support for gay rights activists (0-3). ***:p< 0.001; **:p< 0.01; *:p<0.05; ^a:p<.10. Source: CYS (n=9,664).

Figure 1: Support for Gay Rights Activist Across Religious Denominations



Average score on the sum scale for support of gay rights activists (0-3), for four religious groups. Source: CYS (n=9,664). Religious attendance: never, few times a year, few times a month, and weekly (or more).