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## Vermont Legislative Research Shop

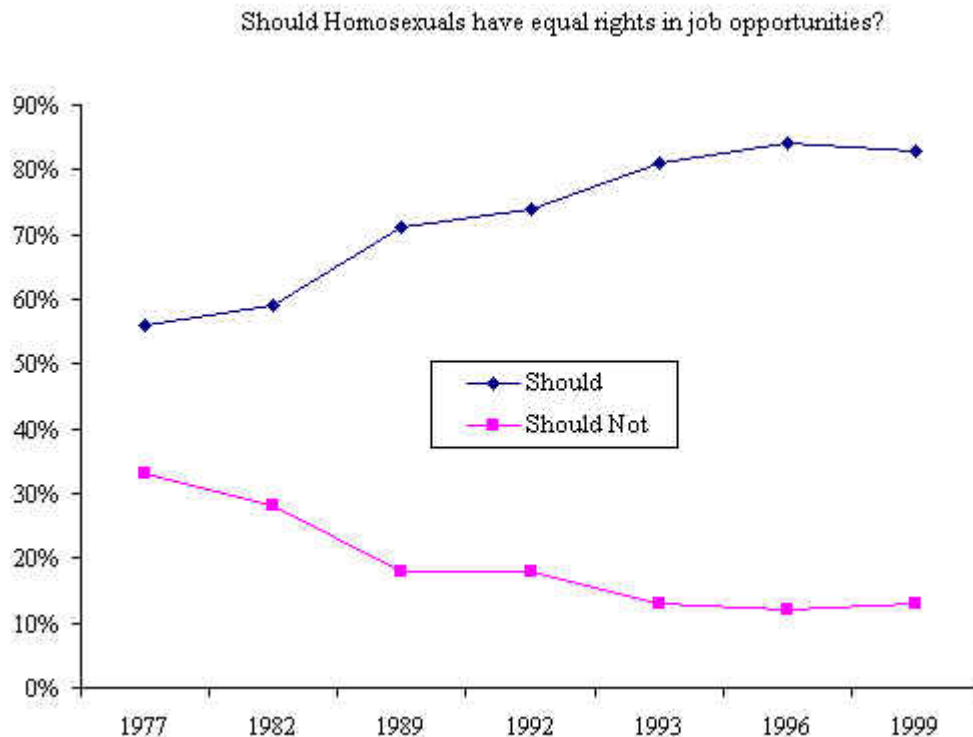
### Trends in Public Opinion on Issues of Homosexuality

The status of homosexuals in America has undergone important changes in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as demonstrated in a recent article in *The Public Perspective* (a publication of the Roper Center). According to the authors, Kenneth Sherrill and Alan Yang, "In 1950, lesbian and gay Americans were in no sense of the word democratic citizens of the US. In most of the country, homosexuality was grounds for forcible separation from society into prisons or hospitals." These political scientists further state that the 1970s were the decade in which that began to change—gays began to be included in the nations major political parties, non-discrimination laws were introduced in Congress, and similar laws were passed at the local and municipal levels.

#### Opinions on Rights

In a January 2000 Fox News/Opinion Dynamics Poll, 89% of 902 registered voters answered yes to the question "Do you think the Government should treat homosexuals and heterosexuals equally?" (Fox News/Opinion Dynamics Poll, 2000). This finding supports another trend in increased support for equality in the work place found in Gallup polls from 1977 to 1999. According to Sherrill and Yang:

When asked whether 'homosexuals should or should not have equal rights in terms of job opportunities,' Gallup reports 83% of Americans favored equal rights in 1999 (three separate surveys done between 1993 and 1996 showed support between 81 and 84%), a substantial increase from a baseline of 56%, reported by Gallup in 1977. [See chart below.] Gallup's numbers are confirmed in a Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA) trend that asks whether there 'should or should not be . . . equal rights for gays in terms of job opportunities' (83 to 84% supported equal rights in three separate surveys between 1996 and 1998) (Sherrill and Yang, 2000, p. 22).



Source: Kenneth Sherrill and Alan Yang, *From Outlaws to In-Laws: Anti-gay attitudes thaw*

## Opinion on Morals

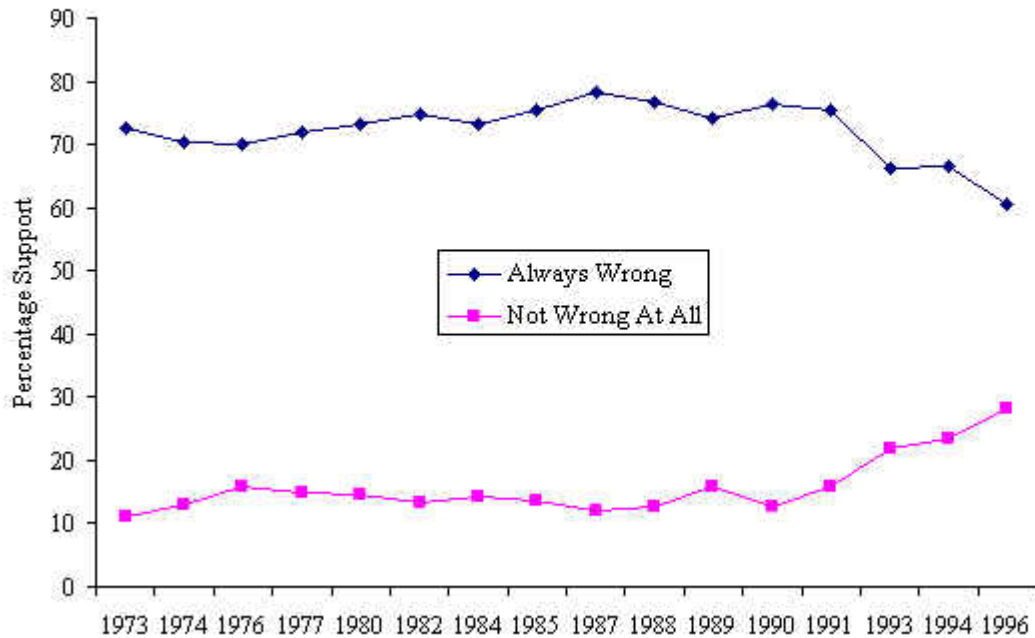
Americans' moral view of homosexuality has changed recently as well. According to the General Social Survey (conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago) only 11% of people surveyed in 1973 answered that homosexuality was "not wrong at all," while over 70% answered that homosexuality was "always wrong." In 1996 28% felt homosexuality was "not wrong at all" and 60% answered that homosexuality was "always wrong" [see chart below].

Sherrill and Yang found similar trends tracking the National Election Studies (NES) feeling thermometer:

"This survey device asks respondents to imagine a thermometer that measures their feelings towards others, on which 100 degrees represents the warmest of feelings and zero represents the coldest. . . attitudes toward gays have warmed over the past decade. The average feeling 'warmed' from 30 degrees in 1984 (and 29 degrees in 1988) to 46 degrees in 1998, but we see a remarkable concentration of Americans who report having the coldest possible feelings toward gay people—zero degrees... In 1998, the median warm feeling (values above 50 degrees) was 70 degrees, while the median cold feeling (values below 50 degrees) was 10 degrees (Sherrill and Yang, 2000, p. 21).

Although public support for gays continues to increase, the portion of the population that disapproves of homosexuals has more intense feelings of disapproval. As a result the majority who support the protection of gay rights are overshadowed by the vehement minority. (Sherrill and Yang, 2000)

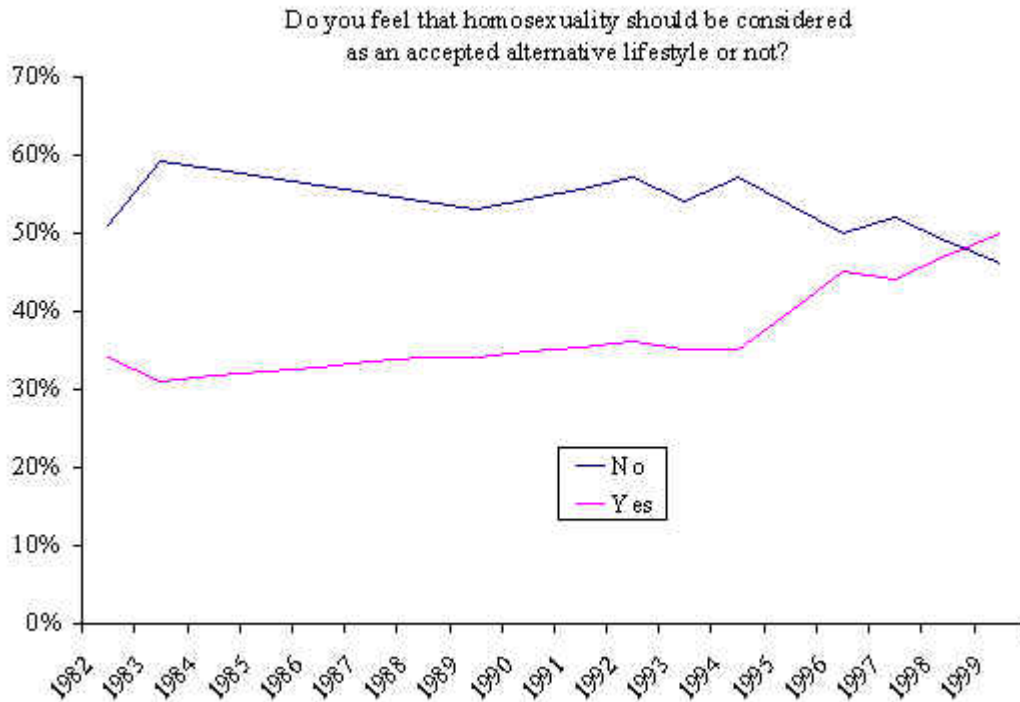
### Same-Sex Public Opinion



Source: National Opinion Research Center General Social Survey Cumulative File (1972-1996) : <http://csa.berkeley.edu:7502/cgi-bin/12/hsda3>

### Acceptable Lifestyle Trends

In answer to a Gallup question, whether 'homosexuality should be considered an acceptable lifestyle or not,' 34% of Americans choose "acceptable" in 1982; that rose to 50% in 1999, when survey participants were asked the same question (Kenneth Sherrill and Alan Yang 2000). The same Gallup poll found that the percentage of people who do not consider homosexuality to be an acceptable alternative lifestyle dropped from 51% in 1982 to 46% in 1999. "Similarly, Yankelovich Partners found that the percentage of Americans who feel 'lifestyles . . . such as homosexual relationships' are 'not acceptable at all' dropped from a clear majority in 1978 (59%) to a clear minority in 1998 (33%)" (Kenneth Sherrill and Alan Yang 2000, p. 21).



Source: Kenneth Sherrill and Alan Yang, *From Outlaws to In-Laws: Anti-gay attitudes thaw*

## Conclusion

The emergence of greater acceptance of homosexuality and homosexuals is demonstrated in the equal job opportunity, morality and acceptable lifestyle questions in a variety of polls. On the questions regarding whether "homosexuality was wrong" and on whether it was an "acceptable lifestyle," the change started between 1991 and 1993 and continued through the rest of the 1990s. The fact that these start of these changes coincided with the Clinton administration's "don't ask don't tell" approach to gays in the military (and further discussion of gay rights) suggests that the government's policy may have been an important factor in improving feelings and attitudes towards homosexuals. This would not be surprising since the political science literature shows that Government intervention on behalf of a minority group can shift majority opinion toward greater acceptance of the minority group.

## Sources

National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, General Social Survey Cumulative File (1972-1996), <http://csa.berkeley.edu:7502/cgi-bin12/hsda3>

Fox News/Opinion Dynamics Poll, 2000, <http://www.pollingreport.com/civil.htm>

Sherrill, Kenneth and Yang, Alan. *From Outlaws to In-Laws: Anti-gay attitudes thaw in Public Perspectives*. (University of Connecticut Storres, CT, Jan/Feb 2000) 20-31