

Left-right disagreement over whether people are “born gay” is both a cause and consequence of polarized gay rights attitudes

Despite the recent rise of same-sex marriage and other gay rights, a substantial number of social conservatives in the US still believe that homosexuality is either a choice or a result of a person’s upbringing, or both. In new research, [Liz Suhay](#) examines how attitudes towards whether homosexuality is innate have evolved, finding that over the past thirty years liberals have been more willing to accept new scientific information on its innateness because it justified their support for gay rights. Conservatives, on the other hand, have been more likely to reject this new information since it undermined their existing opposition to gay rights.



Are people born gay or straight, or do they choose their sexual orientation? In recent decades, this question has become a litmus test for Americans’ attitudes toward gay rights. Social liberals, who usually support gay rights, tend to say homosexuality is innate. Social conservatives, who usually oppose gay rights, tend to say homosexuality is *not* innate—that it is either a choice, the product of a person’s upbringing, or both.

In [recent research](#) Jeremiah Garretson and I examine the causes and consequences of liberals’ and conservatives’ disagreements over why sexual orientation varies among people.

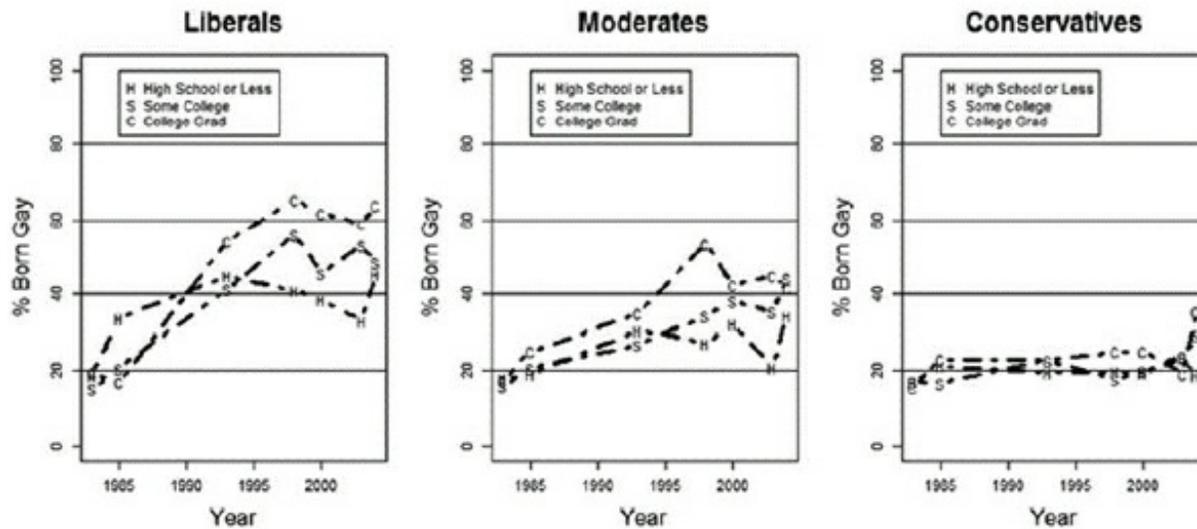
To begin, we find that this factual disagreement—so evident in American politics today—is relatively recent. If we go back 30 years to 1985, only about 20 percent of Americans said that lesbians and gay men are “born that way,” and liberals and conservatives expressed this view at about the same rate. However, between 1985 and 2000, liberal endorsement of the “born gay” belief more than doubled, whereas conservative endorsement of that view basically remained flat.

What instigated this change?

In the early 1990s, scientists produced an outpouring of research suggesting that sexual orientation has a biological component; at least 50 such studies were published during the 1990s (up from single digits the previous decade), with the most important published between 1991 and 1993. This research also received a great deal of [media coverage](#). This coverage of scientists’ discoveries should have shifted Americans’ beliefs in the aggregate, and [previous research](#) suggests it certainly did.

However, as we noted above, the shift was not uniform. In fact, the on-average increase in Americans’ belief that people are “born gay” that followed media coverage of these scientific studies was driven mainly by self-identified liberals and, to a lesser extent, moderates. See Figure 1 below, which draws on data from twelve reputable public opinion surveys conducted between 1983 and 2004 and made available by the Roper Center.

Figure 1 – Explanations for Homosexuality by Ideology and Education across Time



We argue that this obvious divergence in factual beliefs about the origins of sexual orientation was driven at least in part by politically [biased assimilation](#) of the evidence (some scholars prefer the more general term [motivated reasoning](#)). Biased assimilation is the phenomenon whereby ideologues accept factual information that confirms their opinions but reject information that undermines them. Bias likely occurred in this case because the new research was perceived as justifying support for gay rights. As many scientists and journalists argued at the time, homosexuality cannot be considered a sin that deserves punishment and/or can be “corrected” (as some have argued) if it is innate. Further, if lesbians and gay men share an immutable characteristic that puts them at risk of societal discrimination, then they may be entitled to protection of their rights under the US Constitution, similar to racial and ethnic minorities and women. With these implications in mind, liberals probably were more likely to *accept* the new scientific information because it justified their support for gay rights and conservatives to *reject* the information because it undermined their opposition to gay rights.

Further supporting our contention that these very different reactions among liberals and conservatives were due in part to biased assimilation is the fact that liberals’ reactions varied by education level, a difference also evident in the figure. Scholars argue that motivated reasoning is greatest among those with relatively more knowledge and cognitive skills because they are better able to recognize the relevance of new information to their values and, if necessary, generate counterarguments where information and arguments undermine their values and preferences.

One might counter our conclusion by arguing that liberals were simply more accepting of the new research on sexual orientation because they are more “pro-science” than conservatives, or because they are more likely to acknowledge the role of genetics in shaping behavior; however, recent research by [myself](#) and [others](#) suggests that neither of these arguments likely holds. Another possible criticism is that our data do not reach to present day, and things may have changed in the last decade. We acknowledge this data limitation; however, [Gallup data](#) from 2015 indicate that the left-right gap over explanations for sexual orientation persists today (although note that the “born gay” belief has increased on the left *and* right in the last decade).

So, we’ve established that the left and the right diverged in their beliefs about the origins of sexual orientation and that this is likely due at least in part to biased assimilation of scientific evidence showing that biology plays a role in sexual orientation. But do these trends matter politically?

Our research suggests that they do. Drawing on data from an [American National Election Study](#) panel survey conducted between 1992 and 1996 we show two things. First, across all respondents, those who said in 1993 that homosexuality was a characteristic people cannot change were more supportive of gay rights three years later than those who said that homosexuality was a characteristic that people choose. In other words, those people who endorsed the idea that homosexuality is *not* chosen around the time the most important biological studies were published became more supportive of gay rights down the road than those who said homosexuality is chosen.

Second, a follow-up statistical mediation analysis we conducted suggests that this apparent ability of beliefs about the causes of homosexuality to influence a person's gay rights attitudes further contributed to liberal-conservative disagreements over gay rights during the 1990s.

Our research suggests that political differences over gay rights drove liberals and conservatives to adopt the “born gay” belief at different rates, with liberals considerably more likely to adopt this belief than conservatives. Once this disagreement in factual belief emerged, it appeared to further drive a wedge between liberals and conservatives over gay rights.

This article is based on the paper, ‘Scientific Communication about Biological Influences on Homosexuality and the Politics of Gay Rights’ in Political Research Quarterly.

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[Elizabeth Suhay](#) is an Assistant Professor of Government in the School of Public Affairs at American University. She specializes in the study of public opinion, political psychology, and political communication within the American context. Much of her recent research seeks to understand the relationship between the public's beliefs about genetic influences on behavior and their political attitudes. Related publications include “[Does Biology Justify Ideology? The Politics of Genetic Attribution](#)” (with Toby Jayaratne, in *Public Opinion Quarterly*) and “[The Politics of Science: Political Values and the Production, Communication, and Reception of Scientific Knowledge](#)” (co-edited with James Druckman; special issue of *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*).



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