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The Social Science Journal

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/soscij



Global liberalization on homosexuality: Explaining the African gap

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 February 2016
Received in revised form 26 August 2016
Accepted 2 September 2016
Available online xxx

Keywords:

Africa
Argentina
Canada
Homosexuality
Gay rights
Support homosexuality
LGBTI Africa
Anti-gay

ABSTRACT

We are trapped in two divergent worlds when it comes to global views on homosexuality. There is the liberal world epitomized by Spain and other nations, where homosexuality is increasingly accepted; gays and lesbians are claiming their human rights; and laws are changing to codify that transformation. The second is the extremely anti-gay world symbolized by Africa, the Middle East and parts of Asia, where attitudes are favorable to criminalization. This research explains the “African Gap” in attitudes toward homosexuality in a comparative analysis of six African nations and Argentina and Canada, South and North America’s most liberal nations on gay rights. Using Pew’s 2015 Spring Global Attitudes Survey data, we find that the major variables have essentially similar effects on opinion in any context. Africa’s distinction is explained by its comparatively higher levels of factors such as religion, morality dogma, and low socioeconomic status that generally retard support for homosexuality, at the same time of lower levels of factors such as education, urbanization, and personal liberty that increase gay support. Africa’s extreme anti-gay outlook is mutable. Two social forces will facilitate this softening: expansion of liberalizing agents such as education and urbanization, and repositioning away from “traditionalism” toward modernism emphasizing individualism, civil rights, and personal liberties.

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1. Introduction

Following its 39-nation, 2013 Spring Global Attitudes Survey (SGAS), Pew reported that there is a global divide on homosexuality (Pew, 2013a). While Pew’s account was not surprising given anti-gay disputation often carried in the global media (e.g., BBC, 2011; Michaelson, 2014) and decades of public opinion tracking intimating a gulf (Smith, Son, & Kim, 2014; Yang, 1997), it crystallized both the facts and extent of the global split by incorporating nations not previously surveyed. As data from the survey mapped in Fig. 1 evidence, while levels of liberalization vary within

regions (see also Štulhofer & Rimac, 2009), that global gulf is largely tracking two worlds. One is the most liberal epitomized by Spain, Germany, Australia, Philippines, Canada, Argentina, and Russia, where homosexuality is relatively highly accepted; gays and lesbians are emerging from the “closet” and claiming their human rights, partaking in public life; and laws are evolving to codify those shifting realities. One of these budding laws was the U.S. Supreme Court’s historic ruling on June 26, 2015 legalizing same-sex marriage nationwide (Obergefell et al. v. Hodges, 2015). While not analogous to policymaking by Congress directly accountable to the people, and in fact producing a backlash of internal demand protests where several states have recently passed laws that restrict gay rights, it is federal law. Earlier, Canada, 2005; Spain, 2005;

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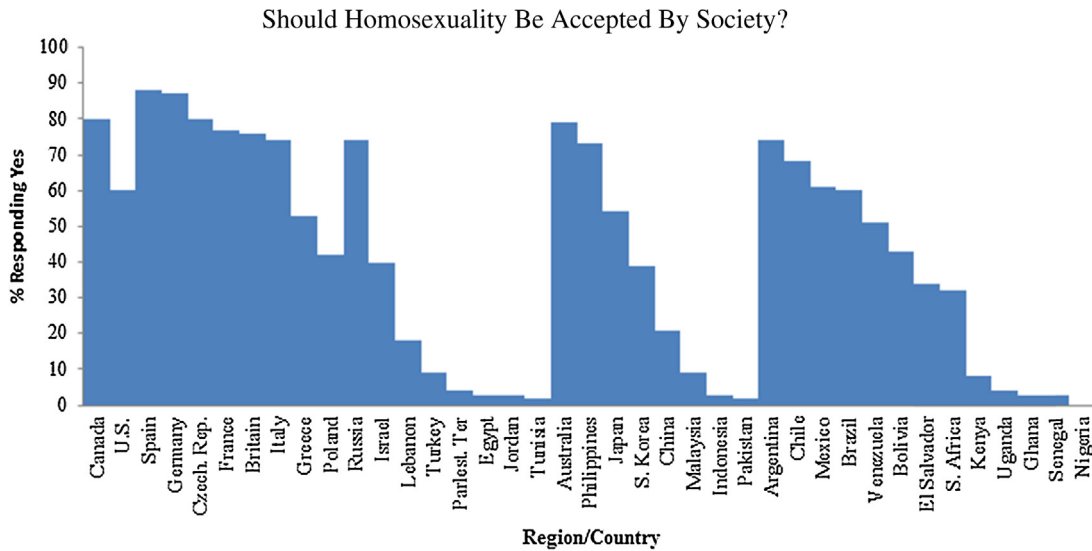


Fig. 1. Should homosexuality be accepted by society?
 Source: Calculated from Pew's 2013 SGAS data.

Belgium, 2003; and the Netherlands, 2001, had all legalized same-sex marriage (Hogg, 2006). In all, “nearly two dozen countries currently have national laws allowing gays and lesbians to marry, mostly in Europe and the Americas” (Pew, 2015).

The second is the extremely anti-gay world epitomized more vividly by Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East, and some Asian nations. Of course, there are also what can be considered middle-ground nations such as Italy, Greece, Poland, Israel, Japan, South Korea, Venezuela, and Bolivia. In much of Sub-Saharan Africa, opposition to homosexuality is to all basic civil rights (including the right to life) and public debates take the decidedly violent and politicized bent of executing and imprisoning homosexuals (Cheney, 2012; Epia, 2014; M'Baye, 2013; Smith, 2014; Tamale, 2014). Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Gambia, Liberia, Burundi, South Sudan, Tanzania, Mauritania, and Zimbabwe have all enacted statutes criminalizing homosexuality. Not only are gay rights more limited in Africa than in any other region (Smith, 2014), but homosexuality is actually proscribed in at least 38 African nations (Jolly, 2008), although “state homophobia” in Africa is diverse (Ireland, 2013, p. 59).¹ Here is how Epia (2014) justifies Nigeria's sensational anti-gay law: “the massive public approval of the bill by Nigerians is highly disproportionate to the minority who disapprove. No doubt, this is a demonstration of democracy where the majority has its way and the minority had its say.” Whenever rebuke of their anti-gay posture starts gaining traction, most Africans seek refuge under this

majoritarian dogma, as if conscience is subject to majority rule (Abah, 2016).

Homosexuality may well be highly contested across the world, but Africa is particularly deeply uncomfortable with it (e.g., Dunton & Palmberg, 1996, p. 5; Epia, 2014; Pew, 2013a; Smith et al., 2014; Ward, 2002). The pervasive legalization of homophobia in the region and the rising tide of anti-gay sentiment have become so violent that the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA)² and the broader civil rights community have raised alarm (BBC, 2013; Kutsch, 2013; NYT, 2014), even if these laws are not enforced systematically across countries (Pflanz, 2014). Homosexuality is one of those “hush–hush” taboos that Africans would rather avoid, although it is not a new phenomenon in the region (Epprecht, 2008, 2013; McNamara, 2014; Murray & Roscoe, 2001). While the American or Western European might avoid the subject of homosexuality over the negative consequences and censure of being “politically incorrect” given the legal and social legitimacy it has attained (e.g., Button, Wald, & Rienzo, 1999; Kane, 2007; Pan, Meng, & Zhou, 2010; Tushnet, 1992; Wald, Button, & Rienzo, 1996), the African would steer clear mostly as a social, cultural, and religious taboo (Epia, 2014).³ Even in South Africa, supposedly at the frontier of the battle for gay rights, mass approval of the lifestyle is minimal (Dunton & Palmberg, 1996; Human Rights Watch, 2011).

¹ These countries include: Algeria, Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Comoros, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Libya, Malawi, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Seychelles, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Tunisia, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

² Founded in 1978 and headquartered in Brussels, Belgium, ILGA is a worldwide federation of 1100 member organizations from 110 countries campaigning for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex rights (see, ilga.org).

³ This hazard of potential sanctions is not limited to individuals. It has been extended to what some Western countries have labeled as “anti-gay countries” including, Nigeria and Uganda (BBC News, 2011; see also Epia, 2014).

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