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A Comparative Analysis between the Histories and Methods of the Pro-Life and LGBT Movements

Savanna B. Fox

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The University of Southern Mississippi

A Comparative Analysis between the Histories and Methods
of the Pro-Life and LGBT Movements

by

Savanna Fox

A Thesis
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in Partial Fulfillment
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Approved by

Troy Gibson, Ph.D., Thesis Advisor
Associate Professor of Political Science

Edward Sayre, Ph.D., Chair
Department of Political Science

Ellen Weinauer, Ph.D., Dean
Honors College

Abstract

This thesis explores the connection between the elite theory and social movements by comparing the success of the pro-life and gay rights movements in America and investigating the effects that elite influence has had on these movements. The research is deductive in nature, investigating the elite theory in relation to social movements. The methodology of this project is organized as a comparative analysis between the gay rights and pro-life causes. The research discovers that elite influence, whether a social movement appeals to morality politics or interest group politics, and what kind of policy changes a movement seeks to affect all influence the levels of success that activists have, at least in the specific movements investigated. It is theorized that the most influential aspects of these successful movements could be implemented by any non-specific social movement that sought to emulate the success found by the gay rights activists, but it is recognized that more research would be necessary for this to be practical and much of the data would need to be quantified to become practically useful on a scale large enough for it to be generally applicable.

Keywords: pro-life, abortion, gay rights, LGBT, social movement, elite theory

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Introduction

This thesis seeks to explore the differences in methods, practices, and success in political social movements, especially in relation to the pro-life and gay rights causes, and compare their success through theoretical measures that are formed by determining identifiers of successful cultural influence. The successes of their causes and activists have been studied, but rarely in comparison to one another. The research will use scholarly accounts of these social movements' histories and activities, primary material from leading activists in social movements, these specific causes included, and past indicators of success in social-political movements to measure change in success over time in relation to activism. The study will compare these two causes' rates of success and analyze the methods used in relation to their accomplishment or lack thereof.

The pro-life and gay rights movements in particular are fitting causes to compare and contrast because they are perceived very differently by society, as the pro-life movement is a relatively long-standing social cause which has been comparatively stagnant, while the gay rights movement has seen unprecedented rates of success in its endeavors in recent decades. A research question that this project will seek to answer is "What strategy is best for successful social movements?", and I will attempt to analyze the histories and procedures of the two causes and determine how their approaches to causing change affect their success.

Another element that will be tested in this research is the elite theory. Elite theory is the idea that the progression of society is neither inevitable nor unavoidable, but that it is strategically driven and controlled by society's elite institutions and organizations. The

theory holds that this elite influence is responsible for the success or failure of cultural movements and the establishment of cultural normalcy.

The research will investigate a hypothesis that is derived from the elite theory. This hypothesis is that social movements need the advocacy of key elites to be successful, and that it is the elite theory that is responsible for the success or failure of social-political movements.

If I am able to identify characteristics and practices that seem to significantly aid in creating social change, this information can be used to identify ways in which less successful movements that also have a strong following are lacking in their methodology and execution. This is the function that the comparative structure will serve. If movements are able to identify and use effective means to create change, or at least understand it, then they will be able to compete for attention on a more even level with other social movements and political agendas making social justice more practicable, or at least predictable.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis of the research is that: for a political movement to be successful, it must have the support of social elites. In *The Secular Revolution* (2003), Smith addresses the idea that America is influenced by the elite theory- the idea that social and political normalcy is a by-product of institutional control and influence by elite individuals and institutions. Smith argues that the secularization of America over the course of its history has been intentional and founded in well-developed strategy. This idea is relevant

because elite theory could play a large part in what makes a social-political movement successful.

Research Question

Combined with this information, I will study both neutral observations of the empirical effectiveness of the methods and documented opinions according to experts, as much of the research is grounded in how the populace perceives the movements. There is a lot of foundational research into the causes of success or failure of social-political movements in general, and a few good sources that offer comparisons of the two specific issues I am addressing. There is little to no research, however, that directly compares and contrasts the success and methods of the two movements in a manner that seeks to offer general conclusions as to how these movements succeed or fail to any extent or why.

Some specific questions that I will seek to answer through the research are: “How has the LGBT Movement become so popular in its relatively short time as an important social issue?” “Are the advocacy tactics used by the Gay Rights and Pro-Life movements applicable to other social problems, or specifically tailored to their purposes?” “What is the best strategy for successful social movements?”

Methodology

Overall Design

The overall design of the research will be a deductive qualitative analysis using the case study method. The research is in the form of a comparative analysis. There will be an element of causal investigation, because the research seeks to analyze the practices of the movements and find commonalities in the practices and the effects of those. This

investigation, however, will be grounded in the comparative nature discovered through case studies of the two movements. The dependent variable is success of the movements in question. The concept of success will be measured as the dependent variable indirectly; as neither of these movements have absolutely succeeded in their goals, it is necessary to postulate that their success cannot be measured directly.

Sampling Technique

The research will have different types of sources: primary sources such as promotional websites and advertising; historical accounts of past practices and their success; intellectual observation on theories of success for political and social movements, such as the elite theory and differing social-political stratagem for success founded in the prior success of earlier movements. The sampling will be based on relevancy to the topic and whether the material can lend either support to or critique of the hypothesis.

The primary material in the research will consist of statements and resources provided on the websites of the leading activists from the movements in question: mainly the Americans for Civil Liberties Union and the National Right to Life Committee. Each organization provides updates and information about their ongoing efforts on their websites, and the content of this information and how they portray it are important in the measurement of the concept of success.

The historical accounts of the social movements will be found in scholarly volumes including Frank's *Law and the Gay Rights Story: The Long Search for Equal Justice in a Divided Democracy* (2014), Hall's "The American Gay Rights Movement

and Patriotic Protest” (2010), and Karrer’s “The National Right to Life Committee: Its Founding, Its History and the Emergence of the Pro-Life Movement Prior to Roe v. Wade” (2007).

Procedure

The research procedure will be deductive. It will seek to find answers to the research question based on the elite theory suggested by Smith (2003), and the theories presented in this research will seek evidence to answer the research questions by analyzing relevant literature on the topic and the chosen political movements and attempting to draw the appropriate conclusions from those. The literature and documents will be evaluated to ascertain what evidence they can lend to either the research question or the hypothesis by offering potential indicators of success in those contexts. Through the research, I seek to discover common indicators of success that may then lead to evidence of causation of success and determine whether or not this evidence supports the elite theory.

Measures

Since the research is mostly qualitative, the major elements are the independent, dependent, and control variables, trends in success and methods, and possible causation among the practices and strategies of the two social-political movements. The dependent variables are the successes of the movements in question. The independent variable is elite support for the movements. The control variables are other measures of success besides elite support, such as legal and policy changes that appear to happen without or against the support of elites. Variables will be measured by the observable indicators of

success. These include acceptance and even affirmation in American culture, especially popular culture, such as television. The data that will be examined is the evidence gathered to either support or contest the hypothesis.

Literature Review

The Pro-Life Movement

Following the movement in the 1950's to liberalize state abortion laws, the opposition to these proposed reforms and abortion more generally became increasingly outspoken. The formation of the National Right-to-Life Committee by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1967 marked the first large-scale organization of a pro-life program in America. Following the NRLC, many state-wide programs developed, both related and unrelated to the National Right-to-Life Committee (Karrer, 2007). In "The National Right to Life Committee: Its Founding, Its History, And The Emergence of the Pro-Life Movement Prior to ROE V.WADE", Karrer detailed the history of one of the founding and leading forces behind the modern Pro-Life movement and describes the foundational organization that is still a major force in the pro-life cause, including some of its early strategies and aims.

J. D. Hunter, in *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (2010), focused on efforts to bring about social change from a Christian perspective of morality. This book offered insight into different possible aspects of the Pro-Life movement, which is typically aligned with Christian morality, by describing some of the difficulties that normally face Christian morality in

social issues in a more general sense. Hunter described efforts to create change as attempts to affect culture, which he defined as being not just the accumulation of a nation's values, but also an institutional structure. Describing the necessity of understanding the complexity of a society's culture, Hunter (2010) has pointed out that "idealism leads to a naïveté about the nature of culture and its dynamics that is, in the end, fatal. Every strategy and tactic for changing the world that is based on this working theory of culture and cultural change will fail- not most of these strategies, but all" (p. 27).

In "Pro-Lifers' Existential Crisis: Why Personhood Measures Keep Failing" (2014), Olga Khazan offered an interesting observation about the specific drawbacks facing personhood measures in numerous states. She offered the comparison between the "Incrementalist" anti-abortion reformers and those who are what she calls "Absolutists". This idea is important because it begins to specify the differentiation between specific methods used by pro-life advocates. Khazan observed that incrementalist efforts often are more successful in legislature because most Americans feel moderately about the legal aspect of abortion, while absolutist efforts, such as personhood measures, typically fail because they are intentionally vague and sweeping in their intentions. The article also quoted Les Riley of Personhood Mississippi regarding a plan to reform absolutist measures to aim at the city-to-city level, instead of looking for state-wide success all at once. This set up an effective comparison point between pro-life and gay rights activists' methods, touching on both the idea of incrementalism versus absolutism advocacy, as well as addressing what size and type of audience is appropriate for specific forms of advocacy.

In McFarlane and Meier's *The Politics of Fertility Control* (2001), they offered insight into the political aspects and implications of fertility control, in general, specifically touching on the contraception and abortion issues. This suggested insight into the differences facing the pro-life and LGBT movements, which of course may affect a social movement's level of success. McFarlane and Meier described fertility control as falling into the category of "morality politics," which they defined as, "frequent[ly] address[ing] social relationships, but their primary concern is the legitimacy of values: which values are accepted by the state and which are considered unacceptable" (p. 3). Similarly, Hilary Towers addressed a related social problem in "In for the Long Haul: Factors Contributing to the Marriage Crisis" (2014). The article compared the effort to "rehabilitate" marriage to the pro-life movement. This article discussed studies that relate social trends to the decline in the occurrence and practice of marriage, and sought to use the pro-life movement as a model for garnering support for this cause. It cited the pro-life advocacy's popularity and success with much of the nation's youth, its successful incrementalist policies, and its influential use of media.

The National Right to Life Committee is one of America's leading pro-life organizations, and the Mission Statement on their website begins,

The mission of National Right to Life is to protect and defend the most fundamental right of humankind, the right to life of every innocent human being from the beginning of life to natural death.

America's first document as a new nation, The Declaration of Independence, states that we are all "created equal" and endowed by our

Creator “with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life...”
Our Founding Fathers emphasized the preeminence of the right to “Life”
by citing it first among the unalienable rights this nation was established to
secure. (NRLC).

This appeal reaches out to people in a patriotic fashion, similarly to the statement on the ACLU’s LGBT page. Both of these movements seek to appeal to Americans on the grounds of their expectations of American civil rights and guarantees, a recurring theme seen in many social movements, and these two especially.

In describing how the abortion issue in America can be viewed as an example of issue evolution, defined as what has occurred when a specific issue creates a lasting shift in the political parties, Adams (1997) pointed out in “Abortion: Evidence of an Issue Evolution” that in regards to the abortion issue, Congress has consistently followed the lead of elites, as opposed to that of the masses, as exemplified by shifting party alignments and changing voter loyalties (p. 734).

The pro-life movement has also been heavily oriented, historically, toward fighting for legal victories since *Roe v. Wade*, as opposed to focusing their efforts on trying to win cultural support for their cause. As such, this movement has seen significantly less elite support in its history than has the gay rights movement.

The Gay Rights Movement

First organizing in America in the 1950’s, gay rights activists began their efforts by forming organizations such as the Mattachine Society, which allowed homosexual men to gather in community. Hall (2010) pointed out that the gay rights movement, like

many social movements before it, relied heavily on appealing to patriotism and Americanism. He also made the observation that “the critical and continuing importance of patriotic dissent to gay rights activists reveals that appeals to the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and “American” ideals of liberty and equality occupied a central place in the movement’s tactical approach.” (p. 539). In the 1960s, “homophile activists adopted the language and ideology of minority rights, engaged in public protest, and were increasingly unapologetic, even celebratory, about the homosexual lifestyle.” (p. 540). The Gay Liberation Front (GLF) that formed after the Stonewall Riot in 1969 and the ensuing Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) were both revolutionary for the gay rights movement because they changed their approach and became more confrontational, deciding to identify and act as a persecuted minority and moved away from the Mattachine Society’s practices of “politics of respectability.” These activist groups began to push for an overhaul of the entire societal structure of America. Neither of these groups completely abandoned patriotic appeals in their activism, despite its historical alliance with conservatism and their move toward more radical political strategies. In describing the effects that these new, more aggressive approaches to activism that the Gay Liberation Front employed, Hall pointed out that “such impressive growth was possible in part because activists were able to draw upon organizations, networks, and resources that had been created and nurtured by the homophile movement during the previous two decades.” (2010, p. 546).

In addition to Simon Hall’s “The American Gay Rights Movement and Patriotic Protest” (2010), W. Frank’s *Law and the Gay Rights Story: The Long Search for Equal Justice in a Divided Democracy* (2014) has provided histories and overviews of the gay

rights movement and its goals, discussing the common tactics used to inspire social change, such as the appeal to American values and ideals in relation to the common practices of American society.

Additionally, there are sources that give evidence to modern techniques used by these social movements and their effectiveness. In order to judge the effectiveness of these efforts, I will study promotional material as well as literature released directly by leaders in each of these movements. American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is an organization known for its civil liberties advocacy, and it is a leader in the LGBT Rights Movement. According to ACLU's website,

The LGBT Project works for an America free of discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. This means an America where LGBT people can live openly, where our identities, relationships and families are respected, and where there is fair treatment on the job, in schools, housing, public places, health care, and government programs. (ACLU).

Social Change

While there has been considerable research in the areas of social change and political movements, such as how they become effective and why, there is a significant lack of research into what the success of one movement can teach another that is faltering socially. M. Arthur's (2010) *Student Handbook to Sociology: Social Change*, Demerath, N. J., Marwell, G., & Aiken, M. T.'s (1971) *Criteria and Contingencies of Success in a Radical Political Movement*, and Mumia's (2012) *Message to the Movement* all have

addressed the topic of political and social change and strategies to make them successful. In *The Secular Revolution* (2003) Smith argued a very specific point of view- that the way in which society progresses is carefully controlled, as opposed to being an inevitable process. Describing the elite theory, Smith claimed that,

[T]he historical secularization of the institutions of American public life was not a natural, inevitable, and abstract by-product of modernization; rather it was the outcome of a struggle between contending groups with conflicting interests seeking to control social knowledge and institutions (2003, vii).

The description that Smith gave of the process of societal secularization also offers an interesting comparison to the LGBT movement. While the growing popularity of the LGBT cause is identifiable with the increasing secularization of society as a whole, the same elite theory of institutional control can be argued in relation to its driven progress.

These works exemplify the differing levels of research and investigation into social change and specifically, Arthur (2010) has addressed advocacy and change from a purely sociological viewpoint, exploring it from that perspective, while Demerath et al. (1971) explored the ideas of change and success in the more explicit area of radical advocacy and change. *Message to the Movement* follows in a similar line to this, being written not only in relation to a specific cause, but also to a specific audience in relation to it.

In *Challenging Unjust Laws Takes Prudence, Courage, and Common Sense*, Nieli (2015) offered generalized advice to the purpose of creating social change by affecting

legislation positively. This has been a popular and important tactic in both the gay rights and pro-life circles, and will provide a more directly comparative model for their practices in relation to Nieli's advice and observations.

Comparisons between the Movements

Because this research is comparative in nature and sets up these two movements to be contrasted, pre-existing material that references these two movements specifically is valuable, as it provides the foundation for a relationship between the two movements.

Conscience and its Enemies: Confronting the Dogmas of Liberal Secularism (2013) by Robert George addresses the broader topics of how society deals with moral dilemmas and how social and political issues often become polarized in society. George's *Great Cases in Constitutional Law* (2000) provides a basis in case law, as it contains a review of the court decision in *Roe vs Wade*.

Robert Gagnon in *Obama's Coming War on Historic Christianity over Homosexual Practice and Abortion* (2006) and Robert George, in *Public Reason and Political Conflict: Abortion and Homosexuality* (1997) investigate potential ties between policymaking and public practice verses social ideals, respectively, in relation to these two issues. Because abortion and homosexuality are both so ingrained in morality politics and such controversial issues, these examples of literature in which they are discussed in tandem set a precedent for discussing their social movements and development alongside each other. As George (1997) points out, "[i]f abortion is the most explosive issue in our "culture war," questions pertaining to the legal treatment of homosexual acts and relationships are emerging as the second most incendiary" (p. 2495-2496).

Analysis

Elite Theory and the Gay Rights Movement

The matter of gay rights typically resembles interest group politics, as opposed to morality politics, although the issue tends to resemble morality politics more if opposing parties are able to successfully expand the scope of the conflict in question (Halder-Markel & Meier, 1996, p. 333). The values held by political elites are most influential in the realm of interest group politics and less so in the jurisdiction of morality politics. Change implemented through interest group politics is largely incremental, which allows elite actors the opportunity to be guided by past policies in dealing with these interest groups (p. 337).

Throughout the history of the gay rights movement, the influence of social elites has been one of the major focuses of their cause. As Hall (2010) pointed out, the gay rights movement has long sought the support of elites in their campaigns. For example, in the 1970's during a gay rights campaign in Dade County, Florida, "Vietnam veteran Leonard Matlovitch (an openly gay air force veteran who successfully appealed his general discharge) and former National Football League (NFL) player Dave Kopay" both were recruited as spokesmen (p. 557). This example also addresses the gay rights movement's appeals to Americanism, as the spokesmen mentioned represent the military and football, both of which are important aspects of American culture.

Pettinicchio (2010) described the impact that elites had in the legalization of gay marriage in Canada after pointing out that while the issue wasn't salient in the media at the time it became legal, same-sex marriage was also not supported by the majority of

Canadians. In addition to the issue lacking salience at the time it became legal in 2005, the public was generally disinterested in the issue, and the liberal political elites failed to discuss this issue in their platform speeches. This situation, although not occurring in American politics, is set in comparison to the American political landscape where same-sex marriage is a much more salient matter.

Elite Theory and the Pro-Life Movement

In a comparison between the American and British pro-life movements and their levels of success, Soper (1997) described the actions of elites as playing a crucial role in the success or failure of these movements. He pointed out that in the years following the decriminalization of abortion in both Great Britain in 1967 and America in 1973, elite support was necessary for the success of these movements. The supporters of liberal abortion laws in Great Britain managed to garner the support of the Labour Party, which ultimately led to success they would not otherwise have been able to accomplish when the liberalizing bill was given a time extension that allowed it to pass. Similarly, when the British pro-life movement later attempted to restrict access to abortion, their policy failed to be implemented because the bill was denied an extension of time for approval, the reasoning cited as being that the government desired to not weigh in on this moral issue, despite its previous behavior of doing exactly that. He additionally pointed out that the relative success of the American pro-life movement was a result of the fact that it has the support of enough elites to keep the issue salient, in addition to the American party system being structured in a way that results in morality politics playing a larger role in political discussions.

Adams (1997) also evidences the importance of elite support for the success of political activism. In describing how party realignments are demonstrated by the shifts in party loyalty to issues compared to voter loyalty to parties and opinions on said issues, he pointed out that the trends in these shifts over the course of the pro-life movement's history have exemplified that trends in party stances on the abortion issue follow the lead of the elites, not that of the masses (p. 734).

Results

As demonstrated by the effects of elite support in the pro-life and gay rights movements, it is completely possible for social issues to have saliency in American culture without interest groups necessarily having the support of the party or cultural elites. In order for these movements truly succeed, however, the support of cultural and/or political elites is essential.

Elite influence has shown to be pervasive especially when dealing with interest group politics, as opposed to morality politics. While both the gay rights and pro-life movements deal with issues of morality, both are often framed as interest group-related issues, and as such are subject to the influence that elites social movements. Further evidence that these movements are largely interest group-oriented is found in the fact that much of their policy-making is concerned with incremental change, not sweeping absolutism.

Based on my findings, the gay rights movement has reached the levels of success that it is experiencing in large part because its activists have successfully and consistently

appealed to social and political elites and framed the issue as one of civil rights as opposed to a question of morality politics, which is an expression of the popular appeal to “Americanism”. These strategies have subjected the gay rights movement to treatment as an interest-group political issue. These strategies are similar to the civil rights movement and are compared to such by Adams (1997) when he pointed out that the civil rights movement constituted an issue evolution significant enough to affect American politics as a whole. The shift in gay-rights activism when identifying as persecuted minorities became common practice exemplifies this as well. This lends credibility to the theory that these strategies that gain so much success for the gay rights movement could be applicable generally to social activism and are not, in fact tailored to the needs of this movement exclusively.

Conclusion

Short-Term and Long-Term Effects

The finding that elite theory is largely responsible for the success or failure of political movements could have the short-term effects of encouraging social activists to model their movements after the interest-group model and appeal to social and political elites for support. If these results are consistently proven to be applicable to other movements, as I suspect they could be, the long-term effects of this research could be that social and political movements would be able to appeal to a familiar, well tested plan of action for activism that could attain predictable results if the elite support is granted. Alternatively, this strategy could potentially mitigate the influence of elites if it is a

subject that activists become familiar with and develop a method to moderate their influence.

Limitations/Future Research

One of the largest limitations on this research is the availability of literature on elite theory as it relates to the pro-life movement; more investigation into this area is necessary in order to have a thorough understanding of to what extent political and social elites help or hinder the movement. Also, of course, there are many other factors that can affect the success or failure of political movements, which makes it impossible to know the exact level of influence that elite support has, although it is without a doubt a major factor. Unless this influence is quantified, however, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to know how repeatable the results experienced by the gay rights movement could be for other social movements.

Future research in the area of political movement success and activism would benefit from exploring how and to what extent the media affects public opinion regarding political issues and especially how much it influences the salience of these matter at any given time. Pettinicchio (2010) delves into these issues regarding the legalization of gay marriage in Canada and touches on the subject in American politics, but there is less research available regarding the importance of these factors to the pro-life movement. Investigation into the measurable effects of social media and technology on social change and political activism would also benefit the study of how social movements progress and how they become successful.

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