iMAPP Policy Brief

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# SAME-SEX MARRIAGE: RECENT TRENDS IN PUBLIC OPINION

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## Executive Summary

*What do Americans think about gay marriage? An analysis of six major polls that allowed for trend data on support for gay marriage between June 2003 and March 2005 found that, after eighteen months of intense public scrutiny, opposition to same-sex marriage remains strong. For example, between June 2003 and March 2005, opposition to gay marriage rose from 55 percent to 68 percent in Gallup polling.*

*The March 2005 Gallup poll also showed the proportion of Americans who support a constitutional amendment defining marriage has risen seven points from 50 to 57 percent.*

*Most strikingly, a recent UCLA poll showed support for gay marriage dropping among college students. Between 2003 and 2004 the proportion of college freshman who support gay marriage dropped almost 3 percentage points, from 59.4 percent to 56.7 percent, or down to about the level of support for SSM last recorded in 2000. This is the first recorded drop in support for same-sex marriage since the question was first asked in 1997.*

## Recent Trends

In the summer and fall of 2003,[1] national opinion polls registered a sharp increase in opposition to same-sex marriage. Experts wondered: was rising opposition to same-sex marriage merely a brief backlash or the beginning of a long-term trend?

Six major polling firms asked the same question regarding same-sex marriage on at least two occasions between June 2003 and March 2005, allowing for analysis of trend data on the gay marriage question. Overall, these results suggest that after rising significantly in the summer and fall of 2003, opposition to same-sex marriage leveled off (or perhaps dropped slightly) in the spring of 2004, before rising again over the past year.

- Between September 2003 and August 2004, polling by ABC News and the Washington Post ["Do you think it should be legal or illegal for homosexual couples to get married?"] found opposition to gay marriage increased 7 percentage points, from 55 percent to 62 percent. Over that period, support for same-sex marriage dropped five points, from 37 percent to 32 percent. Americans now oppose gay marriage by a margin of 62 percent to 32 percent.
- Between December 2003 and December 2004, Quinnipiac University polling ["Would you support or oppose a law that would allow same-sex couples to get married?"] shows opposition to same-sex marriage climbing 5 percentage points, from 60 to 65 percent. Meanwhile support for same-sex marriage dropped by 4 percentage points, from 35 percent to 31 percent. Americans in this poll opposed SSM by a margin of 65 percent to 31 percent.

- Between July 2003 and August 2004, the Pew poll ["Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose . . . allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally?"] showed opposition to same-sex marriage climbing 7 percentage points, from 53 percent to 60 percent. Over that period support for same-sex marriage dropped 9 percentage points, from 38 percent in July 2003 to 29 percent in August of 2004. Americans now oppose gay marriage in this poll 60 to 29 percent.[2]
- Between June 2003 and March 2005, Gallup polling ["Do you think marriages between homosexuals should or should not be recognized by the law as valid, with the same rights as traditional marriages?"] found opposition to same-sex marriage climbed 13 percentage points, from 55 percent to 68 percent. The March 2005 finding is the highest level of opposition to same-sex marriage ever recorded in a Gallup poll (equaling the results of March 1996 polling). Meanwhile, during the same period, the proportion of Americans who support same-sex marriage dropped 11 percentage points, from 39 percent to 28 percent. Americans in the latest Gallup poll now oppose gay marriage 68 percent to 28 percent.
- In March 2004, CBS News and the New York Times introduced a new question: "Which comes closest to your view? Gay couples should be allowed to legally marry, or Gay couples should be allowed to form civil unions but not legally marry, or There should be no legal recognition of a gay couple's relationship?" When offered the option of civil unions, less than a quarter of Americans currently support same-sex marriage. Between March 2004 and July 2004, the proportion of Americans supporting gay marriage climbed six percentage points, from 22 percent to 28 percent, before dropping back to 23 percent in February 2005. The number of respondents opposed to all legal recognition of same-sex unions remained essentially unchanged, starting at 40 percent in March 2004, dropping to 38 percent in July, and then climbing back to 41 percent in February 2005.

**Next Generation on Marriage**

UCLA annually polls nearly 290,000 college freshmen in the United States. In 2004, for the first time since UCLA began asking the question, the proportion of college freshmen supporting same-sex marriage decreased, dropping from 59.4 percent in 2003 to 56.7 percent in 2004, or about the same level (56 percent) as college freshman registered in 2000.

**Constitutional Amendment**

To what extent does growing opposition to gay marriage translate into growing support for a constitutional amendment?

We did not conduct a comprehensive analysis of trends in support for a constitutional amendment, but the most recent Gallup poll finds that rising opposition to gay marriage has been accompanied by rising support for a constitutional amendment on marriage. In February 2004 (the first time post-*Goodridge* that Gallup asked the constitutional amendment question)["Would you favor or oppose a constitutional amendment that would define marriage as being between a man and a woman, thus barring marriages between gay or lesbian couples?], Americans only narrowly favored a marriage amendment, 49 percent in favor to 46 percent opposed. By March 2005, Americans favored a constitutional amendment by a much stronger 57 percent in favor to 37 percent opposed. As opposition to same-sex marriage climbed to 68 percent, the "gap" between opposition to same-sex marriage and support for a constitutional amendment dropped slightly from 15 percent to 11 percent.

## Conclusion

The significant increase in opposition to same-sex marriage which occurred during the fall of 2003 has been sustained over the past eighteen months. After leveling off in the spring of 2004, several recent polls suggest that opposition has once again begun to climb.

As opposition to gay marriage has risen, so has support for a constitutional amendment which would define marriage as the union of a husband and wife throughout the United States.

## Endnotes

[1] The new national visibility of same-sex marriage as an issue was probably precipitated by three events: the decision of Canadian courts to legalize same-sex marriage, the *Lawrence* decision by the Supreme Court, which gave rise to wide speculation about whether gay marriage would be legalized by federal courts, and the *Goodridge* decision making Massachusetts the first U.S. state to create same-sex marriage.

[2] Intervening polls showed same-sex marriage support declining to 30 percent in November and December 2003 polling, rising slightly to 32 percent in March and July of 2004 (within the margin of error), before dropping again to 29 percent in August 2004.

## SAME-SEX MARRIAGE POLLS

### ABC News/Washington Post

"Do you think it should be legal or illegal for homosexual couples to get married?"

| | Young Adults (18-30) | | | All Adults | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | **Legal** | **Illegal** | **Other** | **Legal** | **Illegal** | **Other** | **Sample / MoE** | **Survey** |
| August 2004 | 49% | 48% | 4% | 32% | 62% | 5% | 1207 (± 3%) | 8/26-29 |
| March 2004 | 63% | 36% | 1% | 38% | 59% | 3% | 1202 (± 3%) | 3/4-7 |
| February 2004 | 54%* | NR | NR | 39% | 55% | 6% | 1028 (± 3%) | 2/18-22 |
| January 2004 | 56% | 42% | 3% | 41% | 55% | 4% | 1036 (± 3%) | 1/15-18 |
| September 2003 | 51%* | 46%* | 3%* | 37% | 55% | 8% | 1028 (± 3%) | 9/3-7 |

* Indicates results for ages 18-34.

### Annenberg Public Policy Center (U. Penn.)

"Would you favor or oppose a law in your state that would allow two men to marry each other or two women to marry each other?"

| | Young Adults (18-29) | | | All Adults | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | **Legal** | **Illegal** | **Other** | **Legal** | **Illegal** | **Other** | **Sample / MoE** | **Dates** |
| May 2004 | 42% | 50% | 8% | 30% | 61% | 9% | 1181 (± 3%) | 5/2-16 |

"Would you favor or oppose a law in your state that would allow gays and lesbians to marry a partner of the same sex?"

| | Young Adults (18-29) | | | All Adults | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | **Legal** | **Illegal** | **Other** | **Legal** | **Illegal** | **Other** | **Sample / MoE** | **Dates** |
| February 2004 | 41% | 52% | 7% | 30% | 64% | 6% | 1943 (± 2%) | 2/14-23 |
| February 2004 | 50% | 43% | 7% | 31% | 60% | 9% | 814 (±3%) | 2/5-8 |
| December 2003 | NR | NR | NR | 33% | 59% | 8% | 3775 (±2%) | 12/1-22 |
| November 2003 | NR | NR | NR | 34% | 60% | 6% | 1167 (±3%) | 11/19-24 |

**CBS News/New York Times**

Which comes closest to your view? Gay couples should be allowed to legally marry, or Gay couples should be allowed to form civil unions but not legally marry, or There should be no legal recognition of a gay couple's relationship.

| | Young Adults (18-29) | | | All Adults | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | **SSM** | **Civil Unions** | **Neither** | **SSM** | **Civil Unions** | **Neither** | **Sample / MoE** | **Dates** |
| February 2005 | NA | NA | NA | 23% | 34% | 41% | 559 (± 5%) | 2/24-28 |
| November 2004 | | | | 21% | 32% | 44% | | 11/18-21 |
| July 2004 | | | | 28% | 31% | 38% | | 7/11-15 |
| May 2004 | 43% | 32% | 25% | 28% | 29% | 40% | 1113 (± 3%) | 5/20-23 |
| March 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 22% | 33% | 40% | 1206 (± 3%) | 3/10-14 |

**Gallup/CNN/USA Today (Adults)**

"Do you think marriages between homosexuals should or should not be recognized by the law as valid, with the same rights as traditional marriages?"

| | Young Adults (18-29) | | | All Adults | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Sample / MoE** | **Dates** |
| March 2005 | NR | NR | NR | 28% | 68% | 4% | 443 (± 5%) | 3/18-20 |
| July 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 32% | 62% | 6% | 499 (± 5%) | 7/19-21 |
| May 2004 | 58% | 41% | 1% | 42% | 55% | 3% | 1000 (± 3%) | 5/2-4 |
| March 2004 | 47% | 45% | 8% | 33% | 61% | 6% | 1005 (± 3%) | 3/5-7 |
| February 2004 | 49% | 51% | 1% | 32% | 64% | 4% | (± 3%) | 2/16-17 |
| December 2003 | 44% | 53% | 3% | 31% | 65% | 4% | (± 3%) | 12/15-16 |
| October 2003 | 49% | 47% | 4% | 35% | 61% | 4% | 1305 (± 3%) | 10/24-27 |
| June 2003 | 61% | 36% | 3% | 39% | 55% | 6% | 1003 (± 3%) | 6/27-29 |
| January 2000 | NR | NR | NR | 34% | 62% | 4% | (± 5%) | 1/13-16 |
| February 1999 | 52% | 47% | 1% | 35% | 62% | 3% | (± 3%) | 2/8-9 |
| March 1996 | 41% | 54% | 5% | 27% | 68% | 5% | (± 3%) | 3/15-17 |

**Pew/PSRA**

"Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose . . .
allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally?"

| | Young Adults (18-29) | | | All Adults | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Sample / MoE** | **Dates** |
| August 2004 | 40% | 50% | 10% | 29% | 60% | 11% | 1512 (± 3%) | 8/5-10 |
| July 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 32% | 56% | 12% | 2009 (± 2.5%) | 7/8-18 |
| March 2004 | 47% | 46% | 7% | 32% | 59% | 9% | 1703 (± 3%) | 3/17-21 |
| February 2004 | 41% | 52% | 7% | 30% | 63% | 7% | 1500 (± 3%) | 2/11-16 |
| December 2003 | 45% | 46% | 9% | 30% | 63% | 7% | | |
| November 2003 | 53% | 42% | 5% | 30% | 62% | 9% | | |
| October 2003 | 45% | 46% | 9% | 32% | 59% | 9% | 1515 (± 3%) | 10/15-19 |
| July 2003 | 52% | 40% | 8% | 38% | 53% | 9% | 1001 (± 3%) | 6/24-7/8 |
| March 2001 | 52% | 41% | 7% | 35% | 57% | 8% | 2041 (± 2.5%) | 3/5-18 |
| June 1996 | 42% | 51% | 7% | 28% | 65% | 7% | 1975 (± 3%) | 5/31-6/9 |

**Quinnipiac University Polling Institute**

Would you support or oppose a law that would allow same-sex couples to get married?

| | Young Adults (18-29) | | | All Adults | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Sample / MoE** | **Dates** |
| December 2004 | 52% | 46% | 3% | 31% | 65% | 4% | 1529 (± 2.5%) | 12/7-12 |
| July 2004 | 54% | 42% | 4% | 31% | 63% | 6% | 1551 (± 2.5%) | 7/18-22 |
| March 2004 | 45% | 51% | 4% | 31% | 63% | 6% | 1865 (± 2.3%) | 3/16-22 |
| January 2004 | 53% | 46% | 2% | 34% | 61% | 5% | 1219 (± 2.8%) | 1/28-31 |
| December 2003 | NR | NR | NR | 35% | 60% | 5% | 1071 (± 3%) | 12/4-8 |

**UCLA-CIRP (American Freshmen)**

Mark one in each row: Agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, disagree strongly:
Same sex couples should have the right to legal marital status.

| | College Freshmen | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Sample / MoE** | **Dates** |
| 2004 | 56.7% | NR | NR | 289,000 / NA | Mar. – Oct. 2004 |
| 2003 | 59.4% | NR | NR | 276,000 / NA | Mar. – Oct. 2003 |
| 2002 | 59.3% | NR | NR | 283,000 / NA | Mar. – Oct. 2002 |
| 2001 | 57.9% | NR | NR | 281,000 / NA | Mar. – Oct. 2001 |
| 2000 | 56.0% | NR | NR | 269,000 / NA | Mar. – Oct. 2000 |
| 1999 | 52.4% | NR | NR | 261,000 / NA | Mar. – Oct. 1999 |
| 1998 | 49.4% | NR | NR | 276,000 / NA | Mar. – Oct. 1998 |
| 1997 | 49.8% | NR | NR | 252,000 / NA | Mar. – Oct. 1997 |

# CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT QUESTIONS

### ABC News/Washington Post

Would you support amending the U.S. Constitution to make it against the law
for homosexual couples to get married anywhere in the United States,
or should each state make its own laws on homosexual marriage?

| | Young Adults (18-29) | | | All Adults | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Sample / MoE** | **Dates** |
| August 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 44% | 51% | 5% | 945 (± 3%) | 8/26-29 |
| March 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 44% | 53% | 3% | 1202 (± 3%) | 3/4-7 |
| February 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 46% | 45% | 9% | 1028 (± 3%) | 2/18-22 |
| January 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 38% | 58% | 4% | 1036 (± 3%) | 1/15-18 |

### Annenberg

Would you favor or oppose an amendment to the U.S. Constitution
saying that no state can allow two men to marry each other or two women to marry each other?

| | Young Adults (18-29) | | | All Adults | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Sample / MoE** | **Dates** |
| October 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 42% | 49% | 9% | | 10/14-20 |
| September 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 40% | 49% | 11% | | 9/21-26 |
| June 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 43% | 48% | 9% | | 6/16-30 |
| May 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 42% | 50% | 8% | 1181 (± 3%) | 5/3-16 |
| February 2004(b) | NR | NR | NR | 41% | 48% | 11% | 1943 (± 2%) | 2/14-23 |
| February 2004(a) | NR | NR | NR | 42% | 49% | 9% | 814 (±3%) | 2/5-8 |

Do you favor or oppose the federal government adopting an amendment banning gay marriage?

| | Young Adults (18-29) | | | All Adults | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Sample / MoE** | **Dates** |
| March 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 40% | 52% | 8% | 1000 (± 3%) | |
| November 2003 | NR | NR | NR | 40% | 51% | 9% | 1167 (±3%) | 11/19-24 |
| October 2003 | NR | NR | NR | 39% | 51% | 10% | | 10/7-11/18 |

**CBS/New York Times**

Would you favor or oppose an amendment to the U.S. Constitution
that would allow marriage ONLY between a man and a woman?

| | Young Adults (18-29) | | | All Adults | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Sample / MoE** | **Dates** |
| March 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 59% | 35% | 6% | 1206 (± 3%) | 3/10-14 |
| February 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 59% | 35% | 6% | | 2/24-27 |
| December 2003 | NR | NR | NR | 55% | 40% | 5% | 1000 (± 3%) | |

Do you think defining marriage as a union only between a man and a woman is an
important enough issue to be worth changing the Constitution for, or isn't it that kind of issue?

| | Young Adults (18-29) | | | All Adults | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Important** | **Not** | **Other** | **Sample / MoE** | **Dates** |
| November 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 40% | 56% | 4% | | 11/18-21 |
| March 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 38% | 56% | 6% | 1206 (± 3%) | 3/10-14 |

**Gallup**

Would you favor or oppose a constitutional amendment that would define marriage
as being between a man and a woman, thus barring marriages between gay or lesbian couples?

| | Young Adults (18-29) | | | All Adults | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Sample / MoE** | **Dates** |
| March 2005 | NR | NR | NR | 57% | 37% | 6% | 909 (± 4%) | 3/18-20 |
| July 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 48% | 47% | 5% | 492 (± 5%) | 7/19-21 |
| May 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 51% | 45% | 4% | 1000 (± 3%) | 5/2-4 |
| March 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 50% | 45% | 4% | 1005 (± 3%) | 3/5-7 |
| February 2004(b) | NR | NR | NR | 52% | 45% | 3% | 1002 (± 3%) | 2/9-12 |
| February 2004(a) | NR | NR | NR | 49% | 46% | 5% | 552 (± 5%) | 2/6-8 |
| July 2003 | NR | NR | NR | 50% | 45% | 5% | 1003 (± 3%) | 7/18-20 |

**NBC/Wall Street Journal**

Would you favor or would you oppose an amendment to the United States Constitution
that defines marriage as a union only between a man and a woman
and makes same-sex marriages unconstitutional?

| | Young Adults (18-29) | | | All Adults | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Sample / MoE** | **Dates** |
| October 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 47% | 46% | 7% | | 10/16-18 |
| July 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 50% | 44% | 6% | | 7/19-21 |
| June 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 51% | 44% | 5% | | 6/25-28 |

Would you favor or would you oppose a constitutional amendment that defined marriage as a union only between a man and a woman and made same-sex marriage unconstitutional?

| | Young Adults (18-29) | | | All Adults | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Sample / MoE** | **Dates** |
| May 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 50% | 44% | 6% | | 5 / 1-3 |
| March 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 54% | 42% | 4% | | 3 / 6-8 |
| December 2003 | NR | NR | NR | 48% | 44% | 8% | | 12 / 12-13 |

**Pew**

There has been a proposal to change the U.S. Constitution to ban gay marriage. Do you think amending the Constitution to ban gay marriage is a good idea or a bad idea?*

| | Young Adults (18-29) | | | All Adults | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Sample / MoE** | **Dates** |
| August 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 35% | 22% | | 1512 (± 3%) | 8 / 5-10 |
| July 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 31% | 22% | | 2009 (± 2.5%) | 7 / 8-18 |
| March 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 36% | 21% | | 1703 (± 3%) | 3 / 17-21 |

*Asked only of those who opposed gay marriage in a previous question.

**Quinnipiac**

Would you support or oppose amending the United States Constitution to ban same-sex marriage?

| | Young Adults (18-34) | | | All Adults | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Favor** | **Oppose** | **Other** | **Sample / MoE** | **Dates** |
| December 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 43% | 53% | 4% | 1529 (± 2.5%) | 12 / 7-12 |
| July 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 39% | 55% | 6% | 1551 (± 2.5%) | 7 / 18-22 |
| March 2004 | NR | NR | NR | 41% | 51% | 8% | 1865 (± 2.3%) | 3 / 16-22 |