Evangelical Ambivalence toward Gays and Lesbians

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*Evangelical Protestants are known as vocal opponents of equal rights for gays and lesbians. Yet there is growing ambivalence among evangelicals who oppose homosexuality but support equal rights. The authors extend the concept of 'structured ambivalence' to explain why tolerance toward gays and lesbians continues to grow, even within subcultures that promote traditional views of human sexuality. The Evangelical subculture has institutionalized competing scripts and expectations about how to "do" religion with regard to gays and lesbians, which creates structured ambivalence at the overlap of social positions and institutions. Using national survey data, the authors find that 35% of Evangelicals have consistently progressive attitudes toward homosexuality, but are less religiously observant. Conversely, 24% of Evangelicals support gay civil unions, even though they are morally opposed to homosexuality. Yet these Ambivalent Evangelicals exhibit the same levels of religiosity as Gay Rights Opponents. Ambivalent support for gay rights has taken root at the core of Evangelical subculture, not just at the margins.*

Key words: evangelical protestantism; gender; sexuality/sexual orientation/homosexuality; marriage; politics; culture.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2004, Evangelical Christians seemed locked into an antagonistic relationship with the gay rights movement (Fetner 2008). Republican presidential incumbent George W. Bush had made a federal Defense of Marriage amendment central to his reelection campaign, in a strategic bid to rally Evangelical voters. A national coalition of Christian Right groups, led by *Focus on the Family* and

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the *Family Research Council*, mobilized the faithful to defend traditional marriage and pass state-level referenda that banned civil unions. This coalition was joined by *Exodus International*, an Evangelical parachurch ministry that promised that gays and lesbians could "overcome" homosexuality by "healing" the psychological and spiritual brokenness that allegedly caused same-sex attraction. *Exodus* representatives rejected the argument that sexual orientation is biologically fixed, preaching the message that "Change is Possible." Throughout the 2004 election season, *Exodus* testified that same-sex unions undermined the institution of traditional marriage (Gilgoff 2008).

However, after the 2004 election, *Exodus International* began to break its ties with allies in the Christian Right, to chart a new course that distanced their ministry from political debates about gay civil rights. On October 6, 2010, *Exodus* announced that they would no longer support the 2011 annual *Day of Truth*, a counter protest to the LGBT community's *Day of Silence*. President Alan Chambers stated, "All the recent attention to bullying helped us realize that we need to equip kids to live out biblical tolerance and grace while treating their neighbors as they'd like to be treated, whether they agree with them or not" (Gilgoff 2010). In 2012, *Exodus* announced that they would no longer support the practice of "reparative" therapy, with the goal of making people heterosexual. Instead, their ministry would only promise encouragement to Christians who "struggled" with same-sex attraction, as they pursued a life of celibacy or faithfulness in heterosexual marriage. In July of 2013, Exodus' Board of Directors voted to close their doors permanently, and launched a new, experimental nonprofit to host conversations about faith, gender, and sexuality. In public statements, Alan Chambers continued to stress his traditional view that all sex outside of heterosexual marriage was wrong, but also that same-sex attraction was an enduring reality for many Christians (Lovett 2013)

Within a polarized political climate, these Evangelical leaders stepped into a no-man's land: they rejected reparative therapy, without accepting homosexuality. Exodus International is not an isolated case. Since 2008, an increasing number of Evangelical leaders have backed away from the political cause of banning same-sex marriage. In December 2008, Richard Cizik was forced to resign as spokesperson for the National Association of Evangelicals, after he expressed support for same-sex civil unions on NPR's *Fresh Air* (Pullman 2008). In November 2012, one of the most influential Evangelical leaders in America, Pastor Rick Warren expressed regret for his public statements in support of Proposition 8, the 2008 state constitutional amendment that banned same-sex marriage in California (HuffPostLive 2012).

Together, these developments point to growing ambivalence within the Evangelical subculture on the question of homosexuality. These public expressions of ambivalence are particularly puzzling, because they emerged at a time when Christian Right interest groups were rallying evangelicals to ban same-sex marriage and civil unions in state-by-state referenda (Stone 2012). How did this

moderate project gain a foothold among Evangelicals, even as the Christian Right mobilized Evangelicals against marriage equality?

This paper proposes an explanation to this question by extending the concept of *structured ambivalence*: inconsistent normative expectations that result from one's social position and the way those expectations require inconsistent ideology and behavior (Connidis and McMullin 2004; Lüscher and Pillemer 1998; Smelser 1998). This paper finds that surprising public statements by Alan Chambers, Rick Warren, and Richard Cizik reveal long-term shifts that have already happened within Evangelicalism itself. In expressing moderate views about homosexuality, these leaders are giving public voice to an approach that they already find well established within their religious subculture. Growing ambivalence within Evangelicalism has important implications for the future of the marriage equality debate. By explaining this shift among Evangelicals, we can better understand the group-level dynamics that drive political polarization over religion and morality.

We begin by analyzing how this ambivalence gained an institutional footing within the Evangelical subculture. Surveying ethnographic studies of lived religion, we illuminate internal conflicts within Evangelicalism that are invisible within polarized public debates. Since the 1990s, the Evangelical subculture has institutionalized competing scripts and expectations about how to "do" religion with regard to gays and lesbians, which apply in different social contexts. We describe how Evangelicals come to experience *structured ambivalence* about homosexuality, as they perform their religious identity in different social domains. Next, we use national data from the 2010 Baylor Religion Survey to identify the key religious characteristics of Evangelicals who support civil unions, while remaining morally opposed to homosexuality. This analysis of structured ambivalence can better explain why tolerance toward gays and lesbians continues to grow, even within subcultures that promote traditional views of human sexuality.

## RELIGION AND OPPOSITION TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS OF GAYS AND LESBIANS

Since the 1960s, American religious traditions have clashed over questions of gender, sexuality, and the family (Wuthnow 1988). According to Hunter's "culture war" thesis, these divides reflect competing views of moral authority: a "progressive" view that welcomes change and affirms diversity, and an "orthodox" view that judges family structures and sexual behavior by reference to an unchanging ideal (Hunter 1991). Among American religious traditions, Evangelical Protestants are the most strongly identified with this "orthodox" ideal-type in their approach to gender roles, homosexuality, and family structure (Wilcox et al. 2004).

Evangelicalism is a movement of theologically conservative Protestants that affirms the authority of the Bible, Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross, the need

for a personal commitment to Christ, and the need for all believers to participate actively in religious mission (Bebbington 1989). In the early twentieth century, theologically conservative Protestants were fragmented along sectarian lines, divided between Fundamentalists, moderate Evangelicals, denominational Baptists, independent Baptists, and Pentecostals (Woodberry and Smith 1998). But from the 1940s to the 1970s, U.S. Evangelicals bridged these internal divisions and built a "pro-family" movement around a shared narrative of Christian nationalism (Dochuk 2011). In the late 1970s, new Christian Right interest groups emerged to mobilize evangelicals for conservative political causes, as part of a broader Republican coalition. At the start of the twenty-first century, Evangelicals were the most active constituents for political movements against the cultural acceptance of homosexuality (Brooks 2002; Williams 2010).

Both "orthodox" and "progressive" forms of public religion were on display during the 2004 debates over marriage equality. Among religious traditions, Evangelical Protestants tend to take the most exclusive views of homosexuality, being more likely to oppose the basic civil liberties of gays and lesbians as well as marriage equality (Reimer and Park 2001). In contrast, many liberal Mainline Protestants, Jews, and Unitarian Universalists defend an inclusive, culturally progressive approach to homosexuality (Olson et al. 2006), even performing same-sex blessings and marriages (Wellman 1999). Catholics are internally divided: while the church hierarchy denounces marriage equality, individual laypeople disagree with official church policy regarding homosexuality, as they disagree with the church's ban on birth control (D'Antonio 2007). While most Catholics and Mainline Protestants are more supportive of gay civil liberties than Evangelicals, they are still relatively conservative in their opposition to homosexuality and marriage equality compared with religiously unaffiliated Americans (Olson et al. 2006). Black Protestants are even more dramatically torn between the pietistic, conservative morality taught in many Black churches, and their prophetic tradition of collective liberation (Jones and Cox 2011).[1]

Previous work has sought to explain why Evangelicals have become a primary constituency for interest groups that oppose equal rights for gays and lesbians, even as the general public has grown more tolerant (Baunach 2012). One contributing factor has been the Evangelical tendency to interpret the Bible literally, as God's inspired word that provides straightforward directions to believers today (Burdette et al. 2005). Though not all Evangelicals are strict biblical literalists, "true" Christians are expected to follow a literal reading of passages that decry homosexuality as a sin (Dudley 2011; Wellman 2008:252).

Evangelicalism also promotes a traditional ideal of marriage, which stresses sexual purity, gender complementarity, and authoritative parenting (Regnerus 2007;

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[1]While many Black Protestants share the traditional morality and theology of white evangelicals, these traditions remain sharply divided politically. See Emerson and Smith (2000).

Wilcox 2004; Wilcox et al. 2004). Evangelicalism enshrines separate roles for men and women, within separate spiritual paths of godly manhood and godly womanhood (Gallagher 2003; Griffith 2000; Wilcox 2004). Same-sex unions violate this "biblical" family model, because they lack interdependence between male headship and female nurturance (Kenneavy 2012) and call this rigid gender binary into question (Butler 1999). Within Evangelical discourse about sexuality, lesbians and gay men are constructed as "natural outlaws to the family" (Calhoun 1997, 160).

Furthermore, many Evangelicals have come to define their subcultural boundaries by opposition to gays and lesbians as a culturally threatening out-group, which embodies the permissive, liberal sexual ethic of secular society (Smith 1998). Evangelicals are less willing to grant civil liberties to gays and lesbians, and more likely to feel "far" or "very far" from gays and lesbians, than any other disliked group like atheists, communists, or other ethnic or religious groups (Reimer and Park 2001). Evangelicals report greater uneasiness around gays and lesbians than other Americans, and are more likely to report cold feelings toward gays and lesbians on a 0–100 feeling thermometer (Reimer 2011). Evangelicals are exposed to authoritarian rhetoric that frames homosexuality as a dangerous and contaminating threat to the nation's collective order. Some pro-family activists claim that a united and powerful "gay agenda" threatens America's very survival, by spreading diseases like AIDS, promoting pedophilia and promiscuity, and recruiting young people to their cause (Burack 2008). Though such discourses are not as prevalent as they were in the 1980s, beliefs about contamination and threat are an important mechanism behind Evangelicals' willingness to restrict civil liberties for gays and lesbians (Burdette et al. 2005).

Finally, Evangelicals resist the idea that homosexuality is inborn, rather than a lifestyle choice (Whitehead 2010). In 1977, Gallup polls found that only 13% of Americans thought that sexual orientation was fixed at birth, but by 2001, that figure had risen to over 40% (Wilcox and Norrander 2002). Americans who believe that homosexuality is inborn are far more favorable to gay rights than those who believe it is a choice (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2005; Sakalli 2002; Tygart 2000; Whitley 1990; Wilcox and Wolpert 2000; Wood and Bartkowski 2004). This is consistent with attribution theory, which predicts that individuals will express less anger and negative affect toward stigmatized groups if they attribute their stigma to factors outside of their control (Weiner et al. 1988). But Evangelicals tend to reject this understanding of sexual orientation, because they subordinate the epistemic authority of science to that of the Bible (Stephens and Giberson 2011; Whitehead and Baker 2012).

This body of work helps us explain why Evangelicals have become an important constituency for political movements that oppose gay rights. But because previous work has focused on explaining Evangelical *opposition* to gay rights, it tends to obscure important ways that Evangelicals are evolving *in parallel* with the larger society. In the next section, we consider how Evangelicals track other morally traditional Americans, who shifted from *opposition* to *ambivalence* about gay rights during the 1990s.

# TRADITIONAL MORALITY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL AMBIVALENCE ABOUT GAY RIGHTS

According to Clyde Wildox and Barbara Norrander, the gay rights debate has changed in two structural ways since the 1970s: First, gay people have become increasingly visible in American society, as more people have recognized friends, family, and coworkers as homosexual, and positive media portrayals of gay and lesbian characters have increased. Second, growing numbers of Americans accepted the idea that homosexuality is an enduring, inborn orientation.[2] As a result, Americans became increasingly likely to think about gay rights as a fairness issue, not just as an issue of sexual morality (Norrander and Wilcox 2002). Because of this cultural shift, public support for gay rights rose substantially *within* all age cohorts, not just through cohort success and intracohort change (Andersen and Fetner 2008; Baunach 2012). Some of this change came from rising acceptance of homosexuality as morally acceptable. But other Americans simply moved from opposition to *ambivalence*: increasing their support for gay rights while maintaining their moral opposition to homosexuality.

Ambivalence became an important dynamic in gay rights attitudes, as more Americans have absorbed the idea that homosexuality is immutable, and become aware of gay and lesbian people in their lives, without necessarily discarding their older notion that homosexuality is morally wrong. From 1992 to 2000, an individual's moral traditionalism became a weaker predictor of an individual's attitudes toward gay rights, as did their personal feelings toward homosexuals as a group (Brewer 2003). In the late 1990s, more Americans learned to think about gay rights as a fairness issue, independent of their moral beliefs and their feelings toward gay and lesbians. But because of this underlying ambivalence, attitudes fluctuate widely depending on which rights are at stake—military service, adoption, employment, marriage—and whether respondents associate them with civic equality, family, or sexual morality (Craig et al. 2005). Hence, American support for same-sex marriage continues to lag behind their support for civil unions (Brewer and Wilcox 2005). While "marriage" cues traditional morality, individuals more readily set aside their moral beliefs to evaluate "civil unions" as a fairness issue (Ghoshal 2009; McCabe and Heerwig 2012; Schmitt et al. 2007).

Though Evangelicals are known as opponents to gay rights, it is important to know whether ambivalence has also emerged within this religious subculture. Political psychologists have demonstrated that ambivalent attitudes have

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[2]Throughout the paper, we use the term "gay and lesbian" rather than broader terms that also include transgender or bisexual people, because this body of survey research focuses on attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. We consider attribution beliefs as a control variable that is correlated with attitudes toward civil rights, not as a matter of scientific fact. The view that homosexuality is inborn has gained growing traction in public debates, but it does not match the lived experience of all gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, and queer people. For example, Diamond (2008) finds that among women, sexuality can be experienced as more fluid, defying easy categorization or changing over time.

political consequences (Craig et al. 2002; Lavine et al. 2000; Rudolph and Popp 2007). For example, ambivalent individuals are less likely to vote (Mutz 2002), and so growing ambivalence potentially decreases the voting power of a political bloc. Likewise, political liberals hold more ambivalent attitudes about the welfare state than political conservatives, putting them at a disadvantage in social policy debates (Feldman and Zaller 1992). Evangelicals are unlikely to become strong, culturally progressive advocates for gay rights, but to what extent have Evangelicals made a journey from consistent opposition toward *ambivalence*, along with other morally traditional Americans?

## ACCOUNTS OF EVANGELICAL AMBIVALENCE

Multiple ethnographic studies report that Evangelical discourse about homosexuality is more complex within religious practice than within polarized political debates. Unlike Culture War elites, who defend "family values" in rigid ideological terms, Evangelical congregations take a more pragmatic, therapeutic approach to the diverse situations of real families (Edgell 2006). Surveying ethnographic research, we find that Evangelicals draw on two different scripts about homosexuality: one to draw subcultural boundaries, and another to engage across those boundaries for evangelism and outreach. These competing scripts generate considerable ambivalence toward gays and lesbians, as Evangelicals struggle to perform both judgment and compassion in real-world social settings.

In his classic study of American Evangelicalism, Christian Smith argues that Evangelicals are "embattled and thriving": they strengthen group commitment by generating cultural tension with the society around them (Smith 1998). According to subcultural identity theory, Evangelicalism thrives because it draws strong boundaries between "us" and "the world," but also equips the faithful to engage with people outside of this subculture. To draw boundaries against homosexuality, Evangelicals invoke the moral logic of divine judgment. But to engage with gay and lesbian people in everyday life, Evangelicals rely more strongly on the moral logic of compassion (Hempel and Bartkowski 2008).

At the level of local congregations, much Evangelical discourse about homosexuality is focused on practical concern for friends, family, and acquaintances (Bean 2014; Erzen 2006; Gerber 2011; Wellman 2008). In her ethnography of an Evangelical Methodist church, Dawne Moon found that their "everyday theology" about homosexuality was guided as much by laypeople's personal experience as it was by biblical and theological mandates. Although members assumed that homosexuality was morally wrong, themes of judgment were rare within the church's public discourse. More commonly, members defined their beliefs about homosexuality by reflecting on relationships with gay and lesbian people in their families, workplaces, and neighborhoods. Laypeople and pastors challenged the stigma of homosexuality as a "special" sin, to minister to the spiritual and psychological brokenness that they saw as the root cause of same-sex attraction (Moon 2004).

Because Evangelical churches foster both tension and engagement with out-groups, their members exhibit a particular pattern of "tolerant incivility" toward gays and lesbians (Reimer 2011; Reimer and Park 2001). Studying churches in the Pacific Northwest, James Wellman found Evangelicals did not see their opposition to marriage equality as hateful, because they were speaking the truth in love. An Evangelical pastor explained, "We want the best for them . . . our heart is love . . . Does that mean I approve of their lifestyle? No. But does that mean I have to be in conflict with them, no" (Wellman 2008:253). Evangelicals refused to see themselves as anti-gay aggressors; instead, they saw themselves as reluctantly forced into politics by their faithfulness to biblical teachings about marriage. As one layman insisted, it was instead "the Democratic Party, the ACLU, the more liberal side" that was trying to "hush and silence people whose views are premised on biblical perspectives" (Wellman 2008:252). Evangelicals drew a distinction between opposing the gay rights movement, on the one hand, and opposing individuals who identified as gay or lesbian, on the other.

Even as Evangelicals have mobilized against marriage equality, the cultural shifts of the 1990s have taken root in limited ways within the Evangelical subculture itself. For example, Lydia Bean (2014) describes how a Southern Baptist Church trained its youth group to stand up to anti-gay bullying. At Northtown Baptist, a theologically conservative church, youth were encouraged to save sex for marriage and hold to "biblical" teachings against homosexuality. At the same time, they were coached to reach out to peers who were "confused" about their sexual orientation, and to favor compassion over condemnation toward gay-identified youth. Within this church, standing up to anti-gay bullying was framed as part of the church's "compassionate" public witness about biblical sexuality. As this example illustrates, Evangelicals have not just *reacted* against the growing visibility of gays and lesbians in the broader culture. They have also engaged in cultural retooling (Swidler 1986) to respond *proactively* to the greater visibility of homosexuality.

In summary, Evangelical discourse about homosexuality has changed considerably since the 1980s, when many Christian Right activists supported laws that criminalized homosexuality and declared AIDS to be a punishment for sin (Kowalewski 1990). Heterosexual Evangelicals have become more aware of the personal struggles of fellow Christians who "struggle" with same-sex attraction, in part because of ministries like Exodus International (Erzen 2006). Within congregational life, Evangelicals reflect on their personal experiences with gays and lesbians to do "everyday theology" about homosexuality. At the same time, the Evangelical discourse of "compassion" has serious limitations for democratic citizenship. Ministries like Exodus International equip Evangelicals to care about gay "pain," but not to engage with the political claims of gay and lesbian citizens (Moon 2004, Chapter 8). Most importantly, many Evangelicals see no conflict between their "love" for individual gays and lesbians, and their political opposition to equal rights for gays and lesbians. Liberal Christians find it double-minded to "hate the sin and love the sinner." But Evangelicals believe that it is *loving* to

confront people with their sin, because people can find God's grace only if they recognize their sinfulness, repent, and have Christ's righteousness imputed to them (see Wellman 1999:254).

However, these competing scripts about homosexuality do create practical dilemmas about how to "do" religion in particular social settings. In some situations, Evangelicals draw strong subcultural boundaries against gays and lesbians, constructing the gay rights movement as a threat to their "biblical" view of marriage. In other situations, Evangelicals focus on sharing love and compassion to gay and lesbian individuals. But it is practically difficult to draw on both scripts at once within a particular social setting. For example, Bean (2014) describes how Lifeway Assembly of God responded to a lesbian who accepted Christ and began attending their church. The woman came to faith through her friendship with a married couple in the church, who had been focused on her "need for Christ," rather than her homosexuality. But on the day their friend prayed to receive Christ, she looked up and exclaimed, "I'm a gay born-again!" The couple quickly moved to clarify the church's teachings, yet the woman continued to identify herself as a lesbian and assert that she had known this from childhood. Over the course of Bean's fieldwork, both ordained and lay leaders struggled to reassert their moral boundaries against homosexuality in this woman's case. Though confident that homosexuality was wrong, they were hesitant to defend their in-group boundaries in the context of a pastoral relationship.

In short, Evangelicals may see no logical contradiction between their different scripts about homosexuality, but they still experience *structured ambivalence* about how to perform them in particular social settings. While psychological ambivalence involves contradictory feelings at the individual level, structured ambivalence refers to the inconsistent normative expectations that result from one's social position and the way those expectations require inconsistent ideology and behavior (Connidis and McMullin 2004; Lüscher and Pillemer 1998; Smelser 1998). Structured ambivalence is a classic concept in sociology, first put forward by Coser (1966) and Merton and Barber (1963). Within research on marriage and family, scholars have used the concept of structured ambivalence to explain why Evangelicals "do" gender and family in surprisingly egalitarian ways, even though they claim to aspire to a traditional family ideal (Bulanda 2011). Structured ambivalence emerges at the overlap between social institutions, such as family, religion, and work, as individuals struggle to perform the contradictory demands and expectations that they encounter there.

Together, these studies show how ambivalent support for civil unions has taken root among active, theologically conservative Evangelicals—not just at the margins of the subculture, but even at its center. Structured ambivalence emerges at the overlap between evangelistic outreach and political mobilization, as Evangelicals struggle to perform competing scripts of judgment and compassion. Within the Evangelical subculture, there may be no logical contradiction between "loving outreach" to gays and lesbians and "faithful witness" against same-sex marriage. But as Rick Warren learned during the 2004 election, his

political statements for Proposition 8 hurt his performance as a pastor to broken and hurting people. Similarly situated Evangelicals might either support or oppose civil unions for same-sex couples, because their subculture provides them with two competing scripts for engaging homosexuality.


## DO AMBIVALENT EVANGELICALS DIFFER IN THEIR RELIGIOSITY FROM GAY RIGHTS OPPONENTS?

In the next section, we investigate the religiosity of Ambivalent Evangelicals: individuals who believe that homosexuality is wrong, yet support civil unions for gays and lesbians. We compare Ambivalent Evangelicals to two other groups of Evangelicals: Gay Right Opponents who oppose civil unions, and Cultural Progressives who agree with same-sex relationships and civil unions.[3] Drawing on previous research, we consider two competing hypotheses about how ambivalence about homosexuality emerges within the Evangelical subculture.

One possibility is that Ambivalent Evangelicals display lower levels of religiosity than other Evangelicals. Religiosity is a complex and multifaceted concept, and sociologists of religion utilize several variables to measure the various components of religion. There are numerous measures of religiosity, and a common way of conceptualizing religion is to trifurcate it into the following: religious behavior (or commitment), religious beliefs, and religious affiliation (such as Evangelicals) (Olson and Warber 2008; Sherkat and Ellison 1999; Woodberry and Smith 1998). Ambivalent Evangelicals may be less committed and consequently exposed to a lower "dosage" of Evangelical beliefs about homosexuality than Gay Rights Opponents. Thus, Ambivalent Evangelicals may be only partly "inoculated" against broader cultural trends by Evangelical plausibility structures. Previous work has found that higher attendance and more intense social involvements within Evangelical congregations lead to stronger opposition to gay rights (e.g., Olson et al. 2006). Ambivalent Evangelicals may exhibit lower levels of religiosity than Gay Rights Opponents, as measured by congregational participation and prayer. Based on previous work, we hypothesize that Ambivalent Evangelicals display only *moderate levels of religiosity*, but have higher levels of religiosity as measured by religious behaviors and beliefs than Cultural Progressives, but not as high as Gay Rights Opponents.

New developments in the political sphere point to a competing hypothesis: observant Evangelicals might be fundamentally divided about how to engage homosexuality. According to this competing hypothesis, Ambivalent Evangelicals

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[3]We note that Culturally Progressive evangelicals are not necessarily political progressives in an ideologically coherent way. They are, on average, positioned between political moderates and leaning liberal. Comparatively, Ambivalent Evangelicals are positioned between leaning conservative and politically moderate, while Gay Rights Opponents on average fall between conservative and leaning conservative.

are as well integrated into the Evangelical subculture as Gay Rights Opponents. While there may be consensus among active, "orthodox" Evangelicals about the morality of homosexuality, there are sharp internal divisions about how to perform this "engaged orthodoxy" (Smith 1998) in the broader society. In this account, Ambivalent Evangelicals are forming their support for civil unions in the context of religious beliefs and practices, not apart from it. This possibility, which runs counter to Hunter's "Culture War" paradigm, has not been as systematically explored by survey researchers (Jelen and Wilcox 1997). These two competing hypotheses can be summarized as follows:

## Hypothesis 1

Ambivalent Evangelicals have lower levels of religiosity within the Evangelical subculture than Gay Rights Opponents, but higher levels of religiosity than Cultural Progressive Evangelicals.

## Hypothesis 2

Ambivalent Evangelicals will be similar to Gay Rights Opponents in their levels of religiosity, as measured by their congregational participation, frequency of prayer, religious identity, and adherence to traditional religious beliefs. Using these same measures, Cultural Progressive Evangelicals will exhibit an attenuated relationship to their religious subculture.

### Data

The present data come from the 2010 Baylor Religion Survey (BRS), a national survey administered and collected by the Gallup Organization. The BRS was designed using the General Social Survey as a template, and it consists of a random, national sample of 1,714 American citizens. However, we limit this sample to include only those classified as Evangelicals to remain consistent with our hypotheses. For an in-depth look at the methodology used in the BRS, see Bader et al. (2007). The BRS contains a wide-array of in-depth measures of multiple dimensions of both religion and politics, making it uniquely beneficial in testing our hypotheses.

### Gay Rights Opponents, Cultural Progressives, and Ambivalent Evangelicals

In order to classify respondents as Gay Rights Opponents, Cultural Progressives, and Ambivalent Evangelicals, we intersected the responses to two questions inquiring about the beliefs and attitudes toward homosexuality. The first question asked how one felt about the morality of "sexual relations between two adults of the same sex." Four possible answer choices were provided: "always wrong," "almost always wrong," "only wrong sometimes," and "not wrong at all." Secondly, respondents were asked their level of agreement with the following statement: "homosexuals should be allowed civil unions," and respondents chose from a four-category Likert scale ("strongly agree" to "strongly disagree").

We intersected the answers to these questions and formulated three categories. The first category, Gay Rights Opponents, is comprised of those who believe

that sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are "always wrong" or "almost always wrong," and who furthermore disagree or strongly disagree with gays and lesbians having civil unions. These individuals' opposition to gay and lesbian civil unions coincides with their personal beliefs about the morality of homosexuality, and 191 Evangelicals fit into this category. The second group, Cultural Progressives, consists of individuals who indicated that sexual relations between two same sex adults is "only wrong sometimes," or "not wrong at all" and either agree or strongly agree that homosexuals should be able to have civil unions. Inversely of Gay Rights Opponents, these individuals' support for gay and lesbian civil unions coincides with their personal views toward the morality of homosexuality, and this group contains 164 Evangelicals. The final category that we created from this intersection, Ambivalence, contains respondents who indicated that sexual relations between individuals of the same sex is "always wrong" or "almost always wrong," and either strongly agree or agree with homosexuals being allowed civil unions. These respondents, like the Gay Rights Opponents, maintain the morally traditional view that homosexuality is wrong; however, they also support homosexual civil unions, like the Cultural Progressives, and a total of 112 Evangelicals are in this category.[4] The distribution of Evangelicals by the intersection of these two variables is demonstrated in figure 1.

As mentioned earlier, we limited the sample to include only Evangelical Protestant respondents that were categorized using a modified RELTRAD typology created by Steensland et al. (2000). Following Steensland et al. (2000), respondents in the BRS were categorized as Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Other or None according to their self-identified religious denomination. In addition to the respondents' self-identification, the name and location of the church that the respondents stated they attended is also used in determining their religious tradition in order to obtain a more detailed classification and retain more cases (see Dougherty et al. (2007) for a detailed explanation of this adapted version of RELTRAD). Our final sample size of Evangelicals classified by the intersection of these questions about gays and lesbians is 467.

*Independent Variables*

We account for a number of standard demographic measures. These include gender (1 = female, 0 = male), race (1 = white, non-Hispanic, 0 = other), education (1 = eighth grade or less, 7 = postgraduate work/degree), household income (1 = $10,000 or less, 7 = more than $150,000), age (in years), marital

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[4]We found that 13 Evangelicals are the inverse of Ambivalent. These individuals indicated that homosexual adult sex is "not wrong at all" or "only wrong sometimes," but they also either strongly disagree or disagree with homosexuals being allowed to have civil unions. Owing to the small number of respondents who fall into this category, these respondents were dropped from the sample.

FIGURE 1. Gay Rights Opponents, Cultural Progressives, and Ambivalent Evangelicals.

| | | Morality of sexual relations between two adults of the same sex | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Always Wrong/Almost Always Wrong | Only Wrong Sometimes/Not Wrong at All |
| Homosexuals should be allowed Civil Unions | Disagree/ Strongly Disagree | Gay Rights Opponents 191 40.90% | |
| | Agree/ Strongly Agree | Ambivalent 112 23.98% | Cultural Progressives 164 35.12% |

status (1 = married, 0 = other), region (1 = south, 0 = other), and political ideology (1 = extremely liberal, 7 = extremely conservative). Additionally we control for whether or not the respondent believes people are born either homosexual or heterosexual (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree) and whether they "personally know someone who is homosexual" (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree).

In order to compare the levels of religiosity among the three groups, we incorporate a number of religious variables. These religious measures include whether or not the respondent is a biblical literalist (1 = literalist, 0 = other), church attendance (1 = never, 9 = several times a week), whether or not the respondent identifies themselves as "born-again" (1 = not at all, 4 = very well), and the frequency of prayer outside of a religious services (1 = never, 6 = several times a day).

*Analytic Strategy*

Our study focuses on determining how ambivalent individuals differ from Cultural Progressives and Gay Rights Opponents. Since our analyses center on the comparison of three nominal categories, multinomial regression is the most appropriate model to use, and in this multinomial model, Ambivalent Evangelicals serve as the contrast group. This model examines their relationship to the Evangelical subculture: how these individuals differ with regard to the three ways of measuring religion, belief, belonging, and behaving, thus enabling us to determine if ambivalence is the result of low levels of exposure to the Evangelical subculture. We also consider variation in how Evangelicals label their own religious identity, since the Evangelical subculture has historically defined its in-group boundaries by opposition to the gay rights movement. In our analysis, we ask whether identifying more strongly as a "born-again" Christian is associated with greater opposition to civil unions, since many Evangelicals define their religious identity by drawing symbolic boundaries against homosexuality. Additionally, our model allows us to control for the perspective that Wilcox and Norrander (2002) highlight: the structural changes in the debate that generate ambivalence among morally traditional people, greater awareness of gays and lesbians as fellow citizens, and increased attribution that homosexuality is inborn, and not a choice.

*Results*

Table 1 provides a religious portrait of Ambivalent Evangelicals, and shows that they are more similar to Gay Rights Opponents than Cultural Progressives. Interestingly, Ambivalent Evangelicals only significantly differ from Gay Rights Opponents on their political ideology and views on the attribution of homosexuality. They are not as politically conservative as Gay Rights Opponents, and they are more likely to believe that sexuality is innate as well. However, Ambivalent Evangelicals are more politically conservative than Cultural Progressives. In their political ideology, Ambivalent Evangelicals are fittingly in the middle between Cultural Progressives and Gay Rights Opponents, suggesting that they identify as "moderate" because their cross-cutting beliefs put them at odds with both "liberal" and "conservative" positions in the culture wars (Treier and Hillygus 2009). Similarly, Ambivalent Evangelicals find themselves in a comparable position with regard to their views on the attribution of homosexuality,

TABLE 1    Multinomial Logistic Regression Predicting Evangelical Attitudes toward Homosexuality

|  | Gay Rights Opponents vs. Ambivalent | | Cultural Progressives vs. Ambivalent | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Logit coefficients | Odds ratio | Logit coefficients | Odds ratio |
| Intercept | −0.758 |  | −3.049 |  |
| *Controls* |  |  |  |  |
| Female | 0.292 |  | 0.511 |  |
| White non-Hispanic | 0.272 |  | 0.385 |  |
| Age | 0.012 |  | 0.012 |  |
| Education | −0.089 |  | 0.416** | 1.515 |
| Income | 0.014 |  | 0.052 |  |
| Married | −0.199 |  | −0.960* | 0.383 |
| South | 0.212 |  | −0.312 |  |
| Political identification | 0.282* | 1.325 | −0.528*** | 0.589 |
| Born into sexual orientation | −0.467** | 0.626 | 1.204*** | 3.333 |
| Personally know gay or lesbian individual | −0.228 |  | 0.475 |  |
| *Religiosity and religious identity* |  |  |  |  |
| Attendance | −0.035 |  | −0.156* | 0.855 |
| Biblical literalist | 0.036 |  | −2.052** | 0.128 |
| Born-again | 0.235 |  | −0.492** | 0.611 |
| Prayer | 0.081 |  | −0.049 |  |
| N | 368 |  |  |  |

***$p \leq 001$; **$p \leq 01$; *$p \leq 05$.
Source: BRS 2010.

as they are less likely to believe that one's sexuality is innate when compared to Cultural Progressives. Interestingly, there is no significant difference between Ambivalent Evangelicals and the other two groups in whether or not they personally know a homosexual.

Ambivalent Evangelicals do not differ from Gay Rights Opponents on anything other than political ideology and attribution of sexuality; however, they do significantly differ from Cultural Progressives in a number of ways. Ambivalent Evangelicals have lower levels of education and are more likely to be married than Cultural Progressives. They are also more likely to be biblical literalists, identify as born-again, and attend church more frequently. Interestingly, their frequency of prayer does not differ from either group.

While 35% of Evangelicals report consistently positive attitudes toward homosexuality, we find that these individuals have an attenuated relationship with the Evangelical subculture, as measured by attendance, biblical literalism, and identifying as born-again. Rhodes (2011) found a similar trend in his study of Evangelical Democrats: in order to avoid role conflict between their seemingly contradictory identities, Evangelical Democrats compromise both their political and religious identities. Evangelical Democrats identify as less ideologically liberal than other Democrats, and they attend church less frequently than both other Evangelicals and other Democrats of different religious traditions. Likewise, pro-gay Evangelicals appear to be alienated socially from their religious subculture, even as they practice more private devotional practices like prayer. This is consistent with Hout's argument that the political conflict of the Culture Wars may be driving religious disaffiliation (Hout and Fischer 2002).

However, it appears as though individuals with ambivalent attitudes about homosexuality do not mirror this approach. Ambivalent Evangelicals attend church, have similar views toward the Bible, and identify as born-again as much as Gay Rights Opponents, yet this sense of ambivalence persists. These Evangelicals are able to maintain their ambivalent attitudes toward homosexuality despite being similar in all measures of religiosity to their coreligionists who consistently oppose gay rights.

We also ran a number of ancillary models in addition to this model where we tested each variable individually, with the standard demographic and religious controls, and with additional variables. All of the results in the presented model remained consistent with the truncated models with the one exception: identifying as born-again. In these models, Ambivalent Evangelicals were less likely to identify as "born-again" than Gay Rights Opponents. We also tested whether or not identifying as a Fundamentalist distinguished Ambivalent Evangelicals from Gay Rights Opponents and Cultural Progressives and no distinction was found. This could be because the Fundamentalist label is no longer a meaningful one in American religious life, contra Smith et al. These findings suggest that "born-again" has become a more salient label than "Evangelical" or "Fundamentalist" for Protestants who identify with the culture wars.

In these auxiliary models, we also tested whether or not the differences in religious salience existed between these groups. These models revealed that Ambivalent Evangelicals consider themselves more religious than Cultural Progressives, but do not significantly differ from Gay Rights Opponents. While these differences were washed out in the full model, it is still worthy to note that ambivalent attitudes toward homosexuality do not force individuals to compromise the salience of religion in their life. Additionally, we found that Ambivalent Evangelicals read the Bible more frequently than Cultural Progressives but did not differ from Gay Rights Opponents. Finally, we also tested for whether or not there was a distinction between these three groups in participation in congregational activities beyond church attendance, such as attending Sunday school classes, Bible studies, and social gatherings like potlucks, and in these models, no significant differences were found between Ambivalent Evangelicals and the other two groups.

In conclusion, Ambivalent Evangelicals support gay rights as socially integrated members of the Evangelical subculture, while Cultural Progressive Evangelicals who accept homosexuality are less embedded in their religious subculture. For Ambivalent Evangelicals, knowing gay or lesbian people does not change their opinion on its own; rather, it is their beliefs about the attribution of homosexuality that are the most vital. For people with high religious salience and high involvement in Evangelical churches, it is important to make sense of gay rights in ways that still retain "strictness" on matters of sexual morality.

Using quantitative analysis, we discover that ambivalent support for gay rights has taken root among Evangelicals who are socially embedded, religiously observant, and doctrinally orthodox as Gay Rights Opponents. Ambivalent Evangelicals chiefly differ from Gay Rights Opponents in their ideological identity and their attributions of the causes of homosexuality. But existing survey measures provide an incomplete account of the social mechanisms that drive differences between ambivalent gay rights supporters and gay rights opponents.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, we extend the concept of structured ambivalence to understand the nuances of Evangelical civility and incivility toward gays and lesbians. This framework allows us to make sense of two contradictory facts about Evangelicals. One the one hand, this religious subculture provides the most visible constituency for movements that oppose equal rights for gays and lesbians. On the other hand, Evangelicals are evolving on this issue in parallel with the general population, even as they remain more consistently conservative on matters of traditional morality. Structured ambivalence has taken hold within Evangelicalism: not just secularization or accommodation of broader cultural trends, but institutionalized sources of ambivalence that generate tensions *within*

Evangelicalism. When leaders like Rick Warren express ambivalent, qualified attitudes about gay rights, they are not prophetic voices crying in the wilderness: they speak for a solid constituency of people in the pews who agree with them.

Though Evangelicalism sustains a strong, morally orienting subcultural identity, its members do not live in an alternative universe, walled off in defense of a rigid, anti-gay "orthodoxy." As a result, the most significant differences between Evangelicals and the general population are all at extremes of opinion—strong support or strong opposition to gay rights. Hence, our findings build on and extend the classic work of Christian Smith and others, who find that Evangelicals have sustained a vital subcultural identity, by marking strong boundaries against their social context, while remaining engaged within it. Evangelicals continue to defend their heteronormative model of the "traditional" family, but at the same time, Evangelical discourse about homosexuality is influenced by many of the themes that drive greater tolerance toward gays and lesbians in the larger population.

Future research should examine the pathways by which particular individuals become ambivalent rather than uniformly opposed to gay rights. In this paper, we show that Ambivalent Evangelicals are less politically conservative and more likely to believe that homosexuality is inborn than Evangelicals who uniformly oppose gay rights. Significantly, it was political conservatism rather than theological orthodoxy or religious observance that differentiated opponents of gay rights from ambivalent supporters. This is consistent with the ethnographic finding that Evangelicalism sustains two competing scripts about homosexuality, with one script emphasizing compassion toward gays and lesbians. It is also consistent with arguments that the Culture Wars are driven from the top down by political interest groups and partisan mobilization, rather than from the bottom up by religious orthodoxy and moral traditionalism (Fiorina et al. 2006). More research is needed on how Evangelicals become conscientious objectors in the Culture Wars, and why these individuals are resistant to being mobilized for conservative political causes.

This study is also limited by survey questions that only ask narrowly about "sexual relations" between people of the same sex. But same-sex relationships have multiple dimensions and contexts, just as heterosexual relationships do. By focusing on sexual behavior, the question obscures whether Americans are drawing more fine-grained moral boundaries between "good" and "bad" same-sex relationships, as they do for heterosexuals. For example, Ambivalent Evangelicals may profess that all same-sex relationships are morally wrong, but still attend weddings and commitment ceremonies for same-sex couples. Does access to civil unions and marriage in some states lead to greater stigmatization for people who reject these institutions? If people accept homosexuality because they believe it is genetic or inborn, how do they respond to people who experience their sexuality as more fluid? Future studies should measure attitudes toward the multiple dimensions and contexts of same-sex relationships, to better understand how American attitudes are evolving among morally traditional people.

Scholars have long recognized the existence of moderate and ambivalent Evangelicals (Greeley and Hout 2006; Smith 2000). But they have not been seen as politically important because they lacked an organized voice apart from the Christian Right. As James Davison Hunter has observed, "voices of moderation and restraint" continue to exist amid America's culture wars, but "the complexity of personal conviction and the subtlety of personal opinion are rarely reflected at the level of public discourse" (Hunter 1991:159). Rank-and-file Evangelicals may disagree with militant Christian Right rhetoric, but this is irrelevant if they vote faithfully with the Republican coalition that the Christian Right maintains (Smidt et al. 2010). Since ambivalent people do not mobilize or speak out, it is assumed that they cannot play a moderating role within polarized public debates.

This assumption is violated by a new kind of institutional conflict about homosexuality: not just between "progressive" and "orthodox" forms of public religion, but also between two groups of morally traditional Evangelicals. This round of conflict pits Christian Right activists against other Evangelicals who do not want to be associated with campaigns against gay rights. For example, the Chicago-area Willow Creek megachurch severed its relationship with Exodus International in 2011, during a period when this ministry was still participating in political advocacy against marriage equality (Love 2011). This decision was not described as a political statement, nor did it herald a change in Willow Creek's views of sexual morality. But this change shows that Evangelical ambivalence about homosexuality can indeed have public, institutional consequences.

In conclusion, we predict that opposition to gay civil rights will not have the same staying power as a "moral issue" in the same way that abortion has. Since the 1970s, Evangelical opposition to abortion grew continuously, as this position became institutionalized as a central tenet of Christian orthodoxy (Hoffmann and Johnson 2005). As a result, new generations of Evangelicals were even more firmly opposed to abortion than their parents, having being socialized into this belief from childhood. Our findings shed light on how young Evangelicals have become more accepting of gay rights than their parents, even though they came of age when opposition to marriage equality was extremely salient within their subculture (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Even as Evangelicals mobilized against gay rights in the 1990s, the subculture also engaged in cultural retooling that went undetected within the country's polarized political discourse. While opposition to abortion has only increased among evangelicals over time, we predict this will not be the case with attitudes toward gay and lesbian people.

In the short term, however, Evangelicals will continue to put the brakes on greater social acceptance for gays and lesbians. Their moral traditionalism prevents them from endorsing marriage equality. But as marriage equality and civil unions become settled law in an increasing number of states, it will become more difficult—not less—for Christian Right elites to achieve the same backlash among Evangelicals that they achieved in 2004. Instead, we predict that Evangelicals will increasingly move toward a mediating stance on homosexuality, seeking to combine support for equal rights with a traditional view of human sexuality.

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