

What is Marriage? Americans Dividing

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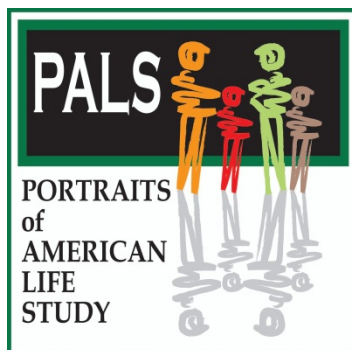


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Executive Summary

Debates have swirled around the legal definition of marriage, as U.S. states and indeed national governments consider the issue. This report draws on the longitudinal *Portraits of American Life Study (PALS)* to examine how the adult American public defines legal marriage, and whether that definition is changing over time. Interviewing the same 1294 Americans in 2006 and 2012, we track responses to the statement, “the only legal marriage should be between one man and one woman.” The findings include that in both years, the slight majority of adult Americans agree with the statement, and there was no significant overall change between 2006 and 2012. Yet, many Americans changed their minds over the period (some changing from agreeing to disagreeing, others from disagreeing to agreeing). The patterned manner in who changed their minds resulted in *more division in 2012 than in 2006* in how Americans define marriage. Specifically, divisions have grown along educational, religious, and age lines. The patterns suggest a growing cultural divide across the nation.

Introduction

A significant portion of the western world has been undergoing a sea change on the legal definition of marriage. Before 2001, marriage was defined as one man and one woman in every western nation. Other unions (e.g., same-sex, men marrying more than one woman) were illegal according to national laws. This changed in 2001, when after significant debate, same-sex partners could enter into legal marriages in the Netherlands.

In just over a decade, 14 other nations followed suit by defining marriage as between two individuals, regardless of gender. Most of these nations are European, but in 2005, Canada became the first non-European nation to legalize same-sex marriages. Canada was followed in 2006 by South Africa, as it became the fifth nation in the world to legally recognized same-sex marriages. And in 2013, the other three non-European nations to redefine legal marriage had their new laws enacted: Brazil, New Zealand, and Uruguay.¹

Several other nations in the western world are considering bills to expand their definitions of legal marriage. In the United States and Mexico, same-sex marriages are currently legal in several states but not at the national level.

Marriage has become a significant political battle ground across the United States. As of this writing, 12 states and the District of Columbia recognize same sex marriage, while 29 have passed constitutional amendments or statutes defining marriage as between one man and one woman. The US Supreme Court is currently considering two cases related to the issue of marriage definitions.

As in many western nations, the definition of marriage has clearly become a significant public issue within the United States. Many groups consider the marriage issue “the civil-rights issue of our time,” and same-sex marriage “inevitable.” And in April of 2013, *Time* magazine ran a cover story declaring “Gay Marriage Already Won.” In that article it says that “with stunning speed” Americans are changing their minds from opposition to support of gay marriage. Even conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh groaned that “the issue is already lost. . . . This is inevitable.”

But Patrick Buchanan wrote in *TheAmericanConservative.com* that far from change sweeping the U.S., the nation is instead dividing, almost down the middle, on the definition of marriage. Many Americans—not a random sample—define and will continue to define marriage as between one man and one woman. Trends will not sway their opinions. Other Americans—also not a random sample—are defining marriage as something else. Focusing on his key divider—red and blue states—he wrote, “If one half of the nation see the other as morally depraved, while

¹ See “Same-Sex Marriage” entry at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Same-sex_marriage, accessed May 27, 2013.

the latter see the former as saturated in bigotry, sexism, and homophobia, how do we remain one united nation and one people?”²

The report examines what is actually occurring among adult Americans in their attitudes toward the legal definition of marriage.

The Statement

Several polls have been conducted on the topic of marriage and same-sex unions. But what we have not had is a survey asking the *exact same people* over time their views of marriage. The *Portraits of American Life Study* (PALS), a random sample of adult Americans, asked the exact same people in 2006 and 2012 their opinion on the exact same statement. We can thus track how people themselves are or are not changing.

The years are important. In 2006, George Bush was in the middle of his second presidential term, only one state (Massachusetts in 2004) had legalized same-sex marriage, the majority of states had passed constitutional amendments or statutes defining marriage as between one man and one woman, and the federal Defense of Marriage Act was being enforced. By 2012, Barack Obama was running for his second presidential term, had announced in that year his support of same-sex marriage, the Justice Department had “ceased to defend” the Defense of Marriage Act, multiple states had legalized same-sex marriage, at least three had the issue on their November ballots, and still, the majority of states defined marriage as between one man and one woman.

Within these national and state contexts, PALS asked respondents to give their opinion on the very same marriage statement in both 2006 and 2012. That statement reads: “The only legal marriage should be between one man and one woman.” Responses could range from agree, neither agree nor disagree, to disagree. Responses in both years were given by the same 1294 Americans, and they represent the United States adult population.

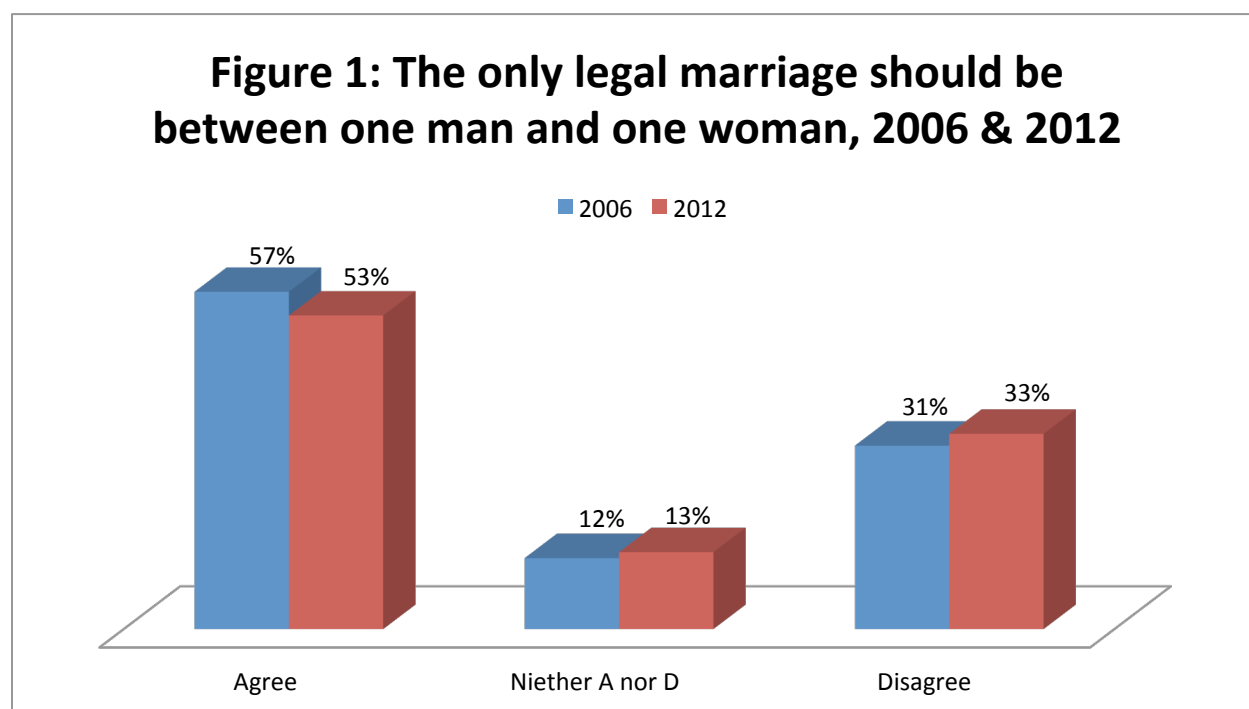
The Findings

A. Overall Opinions

The news of massive public opinion change has, according to the *PALS* data, been exaggerated. In fact, we find that statistically, there was no change in people’s response to legal marriage being defined as one man and one woman. In both years, slightly over half of adult Americans

² Quotes from this paragraph and the preceding one taken from “How they See Us: The Debate Over Gay Marriage,” and “Gay Marriage: How Traditionalists Lost the Argument,” *The Week* 13(612), April 12, 2013, p. 14 and p. 16.

agreed with the statement (57% agreed in 2006, 53% agreed in 2012, not a statistically significant change)³, about one-third disagreed, and the remainder were uncertain (see Figure 1).



SOURCE: *Portraits of American Life Study*, N = the same 1294 people interviewed both in 2006 and 2012.
No statistically significant changes between survey years.

However, when we look behind the overall numbers, we find that many people did indeed change their minds over the 6-year period. The most stable category was among Americans who agreed in 2006 that the only legal marriage should be between one man and one woman. About three-quarters (74%) who agreed with the statement in 2006 also agreed with it in 2012. Among those who disagreed with the statement in 2006, 61% also disagreed in 2012.

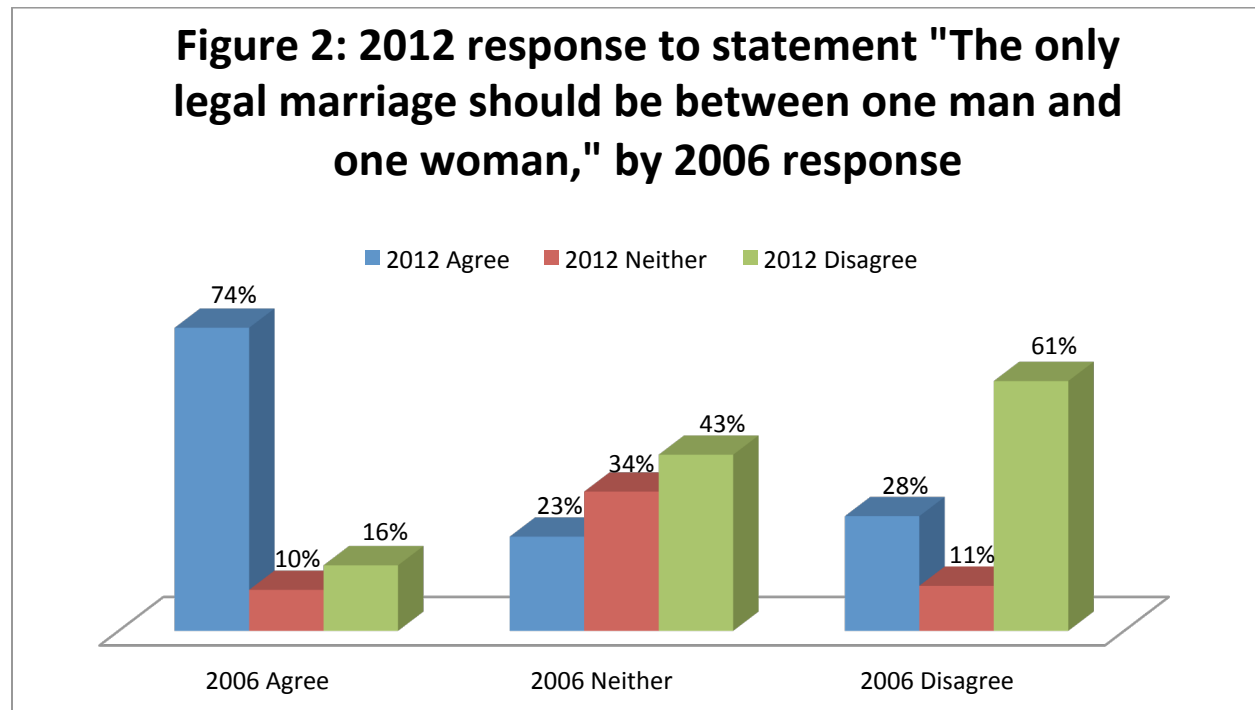
What is surprising in light of other polls and the dominant media reports that Americans are moving in droves from defining marriage as one man and one woman to an expanded definition is the movement of people in the other direction as well, a fact missed by surveys that do not follow the same people over time.

As shown in Figure 2, we did find that 16% of people who agreed in 2006 that the only legal marriage should be between one man and one woman *disagreed* with that statement in 2012.

³ Because surveys are samples of a larger population, we must use probability theory and statistical tests to determine if findings are the result of sampling error or due to real change. In this case, for example, the statistical tests all indicate that the 4% change is not large enough to be considered real change. Instead, it must be attributed to sampling error. We used multiple statistical tests, each making different assumptions, but all indicated no change between 2006 and 2012.

But conversely, the survey found that over one-quarter (28%) of people who disagreed with the statement in 2006 *agreed* with the statement in 2012. So among those respondents agreeing or disagreeing in 2006, *more actually switched to agree than to disagree*. And among those who in 2006 neither disagreed nor agreed with the statement (13% of the sample), by 2012 almost two thirds had taken a different position: 42% disagreeing, and 23% agreeing.

Thus we find substantial movement of people in every direction on the topic of legal marriage. The end result is that overall the percentages end up unchanged.



SOURCE: *Portraits of American Life Study*, N = the same 1294 people interviewed both in 2006 and 2012
Figure 2 shows that those who agreed to marriage statement in 2006 were the most likely to give the same response in 2012.

Our analysis went further. We examined responses along several dimensions: demographics and religion most especially. In neither year was there a difference between males and females. The same percentages of both male and females agree, disagree, and are uncertain about the legal definition of marriage.

In both years, African Americans were significantly more likely to agree that the only legal marriage should be between one man and one woman than were other racial/ethnic groups (roughly, 66% versus 54%). The only significant change for racial/ethnic groups was among Asians. Although in both survey years, 55% of Asians agreed with the marriage statement, the percentage who disagreed doubled (from 16% to 32%), as Asians who were uncertain in 2006 largely shifted to disagreeing in 2012.

We examined the opinions of Americans depending on whether they live in a state that defines marriage as one man and one woman (29 states) or not (21 states).⁴ Our expectation, given the national debate and often divided nature between “red states” and “blue states,” was that the opinions of adults would vary significantly based on which type of state they lived in.

What we found, however, was the opposite. Regardless of what type of state people live in, in 2012, 54% agreed with the marriage statement, about a third disagreed, and the remainder was uncertain.

What is striking about this finding is it suggests that how marriage is legally defined across the states has *little to do with actual public opinion*, and more to do with higher-level political debates and special interest groups. Of course, one survey question is not sufficient to determine if this is the case—it only suggest such—and more research into why states end up with the legal definition of marriage that they do is warranted. What will also be interesting to track is whether public opinion follows law over time, that is, whether greater change in public opinion will occur in states not defining marriage as one man and one woman.

B. America Dividing

What our findings also reveal, however, is that on important aspects that divided Americans on the marriage issue in 2006—most especially education, religion, and age—the nation had become *more divided* by 2012.

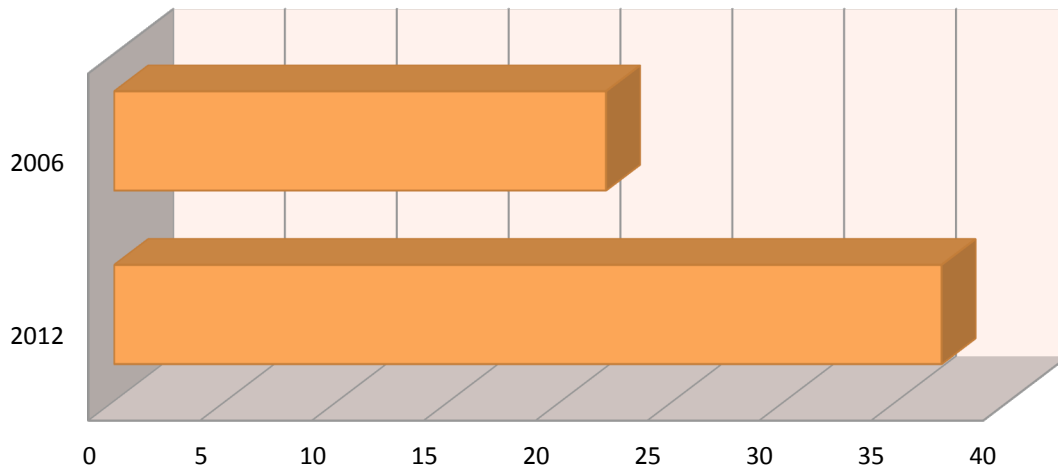
Along educational lines, the nation seems divided into two main categories—those with and without a college degree. While the majority of those with at least a college degree disagree that the only legal marriage should be between one man and one woman, the majority of those with some college or less agree (more than 60% in fact).

And zeroing in on the ends of the education continuum reveals the growing divide. In 2006, 66% of Americans without a high school diploma agreed that the only legal marriage should be between one man and one woman, while only 44% of those with education beyond college agreed. That was a gap of 22 percentage points (66% - 44%).

By 2012, the percentage of Americans without a high school diploma agreeing with the marriage statement increased to 75%, while the percentage of the post-college educated agreeing with the marriage statement decreased to 38%. Thus, as illustrated in Figure 3, the marriage definition gap between the lowest and highest formally educated Americans increased from 22 percentage points in 2006 to 37 percentage points in 2012 (75% - 38%). The education gap is widening.

⁴ Because the legality of the California amendment defining legal marriage as one man and one woman is, at the time of this writing, being considered by the Supreme Court, we did all of our analyses twice, once with California included with the one man/one woman marriage states, and once with California included in the other states. The results do not vary so we report only the case of California being included with the one man/one woman states.

Figure 3: Education gap on marriage definition increasing between those without a high school degree and those with post-college



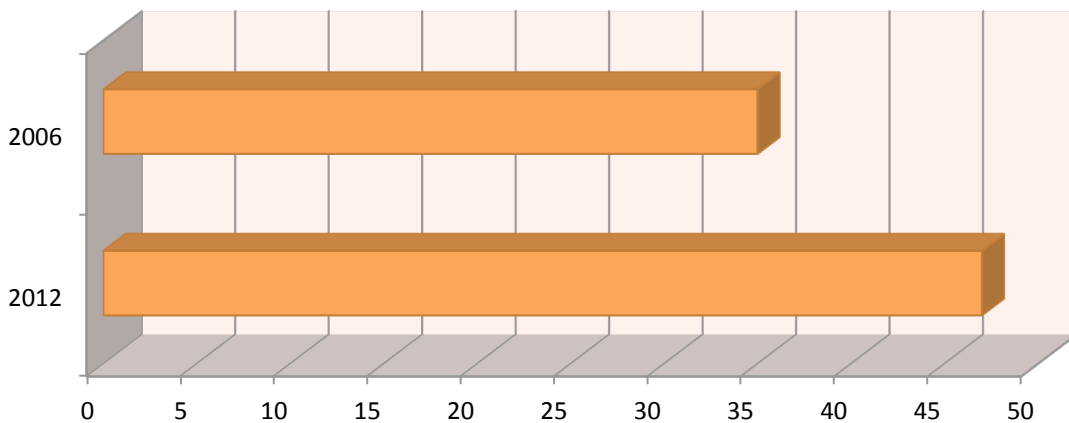
SOURCE: *Portraits of American Life Study*, N = the same 1294 people interviewed both in 2006 and 2012
Figure 3 shows the increasing education gap in agreement to the statement that “the only legal marriage should be between one man and one woman.”

So too are religious gaps. This is most clearly seen by examining religious service attendance. In 2006, 45% of those who never attended religious services in the past year (non-attenders) agreed that the only legal marriage should be between one man and one woman. By 2012, the percentage of non-attenders who agreed with the marriage question declined to 37%.

Conversely, for those who attend monthly, the percentage agreeing with the marriage statement increased from 50% to 65% in the survey period; for those attending weekly the percentage agreeing with the marriage statement increased from 64% to 71%; and for those attending more than weekly the percentage agreeing with the marriage statement increased in the sample from 80% to 84%.

These changes then have significantly increased the religious attendance gaps. The gap between non-attenders and weekly attenders was 19 percentage points in 2006 (64% - 45%) but increased to 34 percentage points in 2012 (71% - 37%). What is more, the gap between non-attenders and those attending more than weekly increased from 35 percentage points to 47 percentage points from 2006 to 2012, a massive gap.

Figure 4: Religious attendance gap on marriage definition increasing between non-attenders and more than weekly attenders



SOURCE: *Portraits of American Life Study*, N = the same 1294 people interviewed both in 2006 and 2012
Figure 4 shows the increasing religious attendance gap in agreement to the statement that “the only legal marriage should be between one man and one woman.”

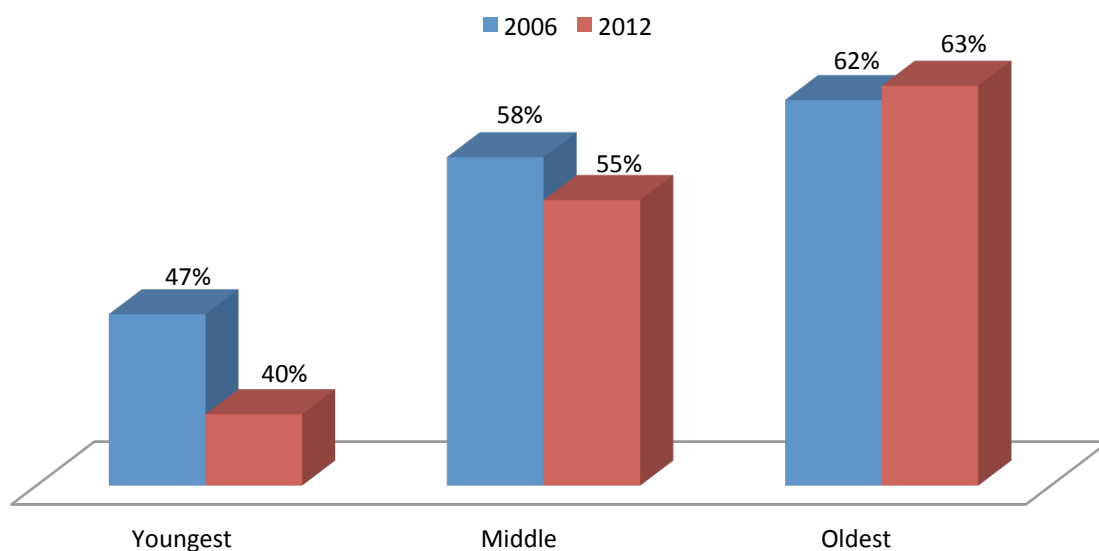
When we compare responses by people’s stated religious identity, we find that Evangelical Protestants are the most likely to agree that the only legal marriage should be between one man and one woman, with 72% agreeing in 2006 and 75% agreeing in 2012. They are followed by Black Protestants (African Americans attending black denomination churches) with 70% agreeing in 2006 and 66% agreeing in 2012. As of 2012, Catholics, Mainline Protestants, and those of non-Judeo-Christian faiths have roughly equal percentages agreeing (54%, 57%, and 57% respectively). Those of the Jewish faith are far and away the least likely to agree that marriage should be between one man and one woman. Only 21% agreed in 2006, and that percentage declined to just 12% by 2012.

Age is always a most interesting aspect of social change. Change can come by people across ages altering their opinions, or by younger cohorts—forming their opinions and views in often different social contexts—eventually replacing older cohorts. In our survey data, the latter, rather than the former, appears to be occurring. As shown in Figure 5, in 2006, 62% of those over 50, and 58% of those aged 30 to 50 agreed that the only legal marriage should be between one man and one woman. But for those 30 and under, 47% agreed (38% disagreed, 15% were uncertain). The gap between the oldest and youngest group was 15 percentage points.

Because the *PALS* follows the exact same people over time, by 2012, all the participants were six years older than when they were first surveyed. Thus our 2012 categories also advance by six years each. For those 56 and over, the same percentage (63%) as six years early agreed that legal

marriage should be one man and one woman only. Statistically, the same was true for the second oldest category (by 2012, 37-55), where 55% agreed. We find a slightly different—though not necessary dramatic—pattern for the youngest adults. In 2006, 47% of the 18-30 year olds agreed on the one man-one woman definition of legal marriage, but of that same group (now 24-36) in 2012, just 40% agreed, a decline of 7 percentage points. It should be noted that for no age group did the majority of its members disagree with the one man-one woman legal definition of marriage.

Figure 5: Agreement with one man-one woman marriage statement by age group, 2006 & 2012



SOURCE: *Portraits of American Life Study*, N = the same 1294 people interviewed both in 2006 and 2012
 Youngest = 18-30 in 2006, 24-36 in 2012; Middle = 31-49 in 2006, 37-55 in 2012; Oldest = 51+ in 2006, 57+ in 2012
Only Youngest group's level of agreement changed between 2006 and 2012.

C. What Really Matters?

Because a number of factors seem to influence people's response to the marriage statement, we conducted what is called a multivariate analysis (the full results are reported in the appendix). Our goal was to see what factors explain people's level of agreement with the 2012 marriage statement. The method we use allows us to learn which factors matter when the factors are considered all at the same time. In statistical speak, we can see the effect of variables net of or controlling for the other variables in the model.

For example, we found earlier that African Americans are more supportive of legal marriage being defined as one man and one woman than are people of other racial/ethnic groups. We also found that those who attend religious services frequently are more likely to agree as well. Given

that African Americans are, on average, more likely to attend religious services frequently than other racial/ethnic groups,⁵ the “African American” effect may actually be due to the “religiosity” effect. Our multivariate analysis allows us to know.

We examined the simultaneous effects of race/ethnicity, education, views of the Bible, religious identity, worship attendance (in both 2006 and 2012), age, gender, and our respondent’s response to the marriage statement in 2006.

Our results show that although one’s response to the marriage statement in 2006 matters for what they will say in 2012, several other factors matter too. These are most especially having more than a college education (less agreement) compared to having less than a high school education, identifying as an Evangelical Protestant (more agreement) or Jewish (less agreement) compared to Mainline Protestants, frequency of worship attendance in 2012 (but not in 2006), and age (again, the older a person is, net of the other variables, the more likely they are to agree that legal marriage should be between one man and one woman). Factors that notably do *not* matter—once we consider the impact of variables all at the same time—are race/ethnicity and gender.

Conclusion

The legal definition of marriage is most certainly an issue that will remain contentious and in the news for several years to come. This report has examined the same sample of adult Americans to see if their views of what legal marriage is are changing. On the whole, the answer is no. We found no significant change from 2006 to 2012, despite significant political changes during that time period.

But importantly, and at the same time, much changed across categories of people. The end result is that Americans have become more divided on the issue—the education, religion, and age effects have become more pronounced over the six year period. The lesser and highly educated are more divided on the issue in 2012 than in 2006. Non-religious worship attenders and frequent worship attenders are more divided on the issue in 2012 than in 2006. And the youngest and the oldest are more divided on the issue in 2012 than in 2006.

These divisions matter, seemingly being yet another marker of the cultural divides between Americans. And they will likely fuel a continued contentious debate in the coming years. It will be important to continue tracking Americans views during these times.

⁵ Jason Shelton and Michael O. Emerson. 2012. *Blacks and Whites in Christian America: How Racial Discrimination Shapes Religious Convictions*. New York: NYU Press.

Appendix

TABLE 1: Multivariate Analysis of factors associated with marriage definition: OLS regression on level of Agreement with “the only legal marriage should be between one man and one woman.”

Variable	Coef.	t-value	p-value
2006 Response to Marriage Statement	.349	7.86	.000
Literal definition of the Bible	.080	1.83	.072
Male	.150	1.22	.228
HS Grad	-.352	-1.66	.102
2-Year Degree	-.084	-0.46	.648
College Grad	-.410	-1.88	.065
Post-College	-.720	-3.06	.003
Other Education	.370	1.29	.203
African American	.088	0.42	.673
Hispanic	.070	0.44	.661
Asian	-.095	-0.04	.672
Native American	2.398	2.63	.011
Black Protestant	.220	0.73	.468
Evangelical Protestant	.498	2.61	.012
Jewish	-.826	-2.42	.019
Non-Affiliated	.103	0.37	.714
Protestant Other	-.142	-0.47	.643
Religious Service Attendance, 2006	.015	0.38	.706
Religious Service Attendance, 2012	.135	3.38	.001
Number of Respondents	1294	R-squared	.323

Source: Portraits of American Life Study, 2006 & 2012

Response range: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neither agree nor disagree (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5). This variable treated as an interval level variable. Bolded p-values for statistically significant effects.