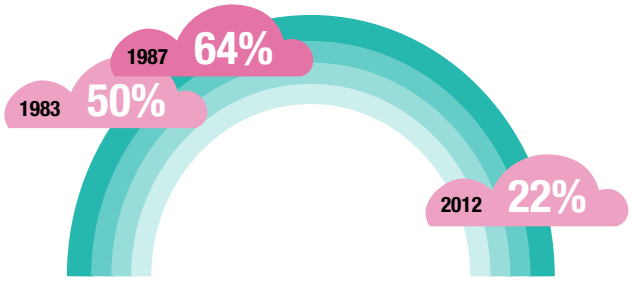
Personal relationships
Changing attitudes towards sex, marriage and parenthood

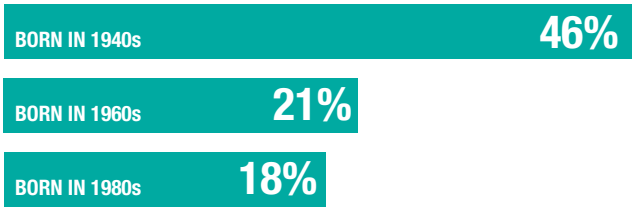
Over the past three decades, the nature and consequences of particular types of personal relationship have attracted a huge amount of debate and controversy – with frequent attempts by political parties to change policy or influence behaviour in this area. But what does the public think about sex, marriage and parenthood within the context of different types of relationships? How have their views changed over time and are everyone's views moving in the same direction?

Live and let live

The last three decades have seen dramatic changes in how Britain thinks about issues such as premarital sex and homosexuality.



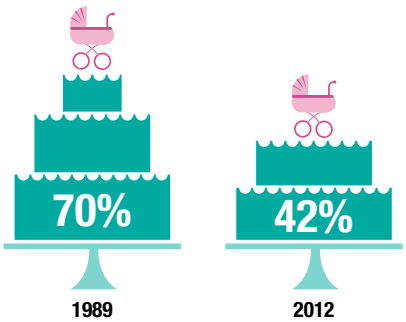
In 1983, one in two (50%) **thought homosexuality was "always wrong"**, rising to 64% by 1987. Now 22% take this view, while nearly half (47%) think it is not wrong at all.



Much of this change over time has been driven by each successive generation having more liberal views than its predecessors. In 2012, 46% of those born in the 1940s **thought homosexuality was always or mostly wrong**, compared with 21% of those born in the 1960s, and 18% of those born in the 1980s.

Marriage and parenthood

There have also been shifts in a more liberal direction in people's views on parenthood, as well as on other issues such as abortion. But this increased liberalisation does not mean differences of opinion have vanished.



The proportion who think **people who want children ought to get married** has fallen (from 70% in 1989 to 42% in 2012). But this view remains the most common one – more agree than disagree (42% compared with 34%).

There are still marked variations between the views of different generations and between those with particular religious or political affiliations. **Conservative Party supporters** are among the most likely to think that people who want children ought to be married; 63% taking this view in 2012.

Introduction

Authors

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The intimate subject of how people live their private lives – who they love, whether they marry, when they have children – attracts a huge amount of debate and controversy, most often about the social consequences of such personal decisions. Not surprisingly then, the last 30 years have seen numerous attempts by political parties to engage in debates about personal matters. Examples include Margaret Thatcher's government's introduction of Section 28 in 1987, in a reaction against local authorities "intentionally promoting" homosexuality, as well as the launch of the ill-fated 'Back to Basics' campaign in 1993 by her successor, John Major, which subsequently floundered in a sea of political sex scandals. Conservative claims to be the true party of the family caused difficulties for New Labour who, in 2001, felt forced to state that it too saw marriage as the best framework for bringing up children.[1] And while David Cameron has sought to rebrand the Conservative Party as socially liberal on issues such as gay rights, he continues to emphasize the importance of family; most recently, he and the Conservative Party have found themselves in disarray over the subject of gay marriage.

The last 30 years have seen numerous attempts by political parties to engage in debates about personal matters

The British public's thinking about these issues, its sense of moral right and wrong, has been strongly shaped by a Christian tradition, especially since the rise of Victorian morality in the second half of the nineteenth century. Marriage, as the officially sanctioned institution within which a man and woman can live together, be intimate and have children, has played a key role in governing how people are expected to live. Behaviour falling outside these boundaries – be it homosexuality, sex outside marriage, divorce, cohabitation or illegitimacy – was at best frowned upon, and at worst the subject of official or unofficial sanctions, depending on the historical period in question. In reality, history gives a less black and white account of British morality. Much has been written about the gap between Victorian values and real Victorian behaviour, and the notion that in the past the English were all respectably married is also far from the truth. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, for example, a surprisingly high proportion of English brides were pregnant on their wedding day (Waller, 2009).

This chapter looks at British attitudes towards personal relationships and behaviour and how these have changed over the past three decades. It focuses on three key areas – marriage, homosexuality and abortion – to consider how much attitudes have changed, and among whom the change has been most pronounced. It explores the reasons behind these changes and, where possible, suggests how attitudes might shift in the future. It also considers how far people's views about personal relationships vary according to their political sympathies and whether this is changing over time, to help shed light on current political debates.

Explaining change

Before we begin it is worth setting out a number of features of the last three decades which may have had a significant impact on the public's views.

"The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there"

Later on we will explore the ways in which British society today objectively looks very different to how it was in 1983 when the British Social Attitudes survey began. It would be astonishing if this was not linked to a change in how the

British public thinks. In the literature, such a phenomenon is described as a 'period effect' and can encompass a wide array of factors that might shape the way people think about their world. Three types of factor are worthy of particular note. The first type relates to events and their consequences – for instance, as we will see later, the way in which the discovery of HIV AIDS in the 1980s seems to have had an impact on attitudes towards homosexuality during that period. The second are to do with the political context of the time – who is in power, the nature of their support, and the key policy debates of the moment; in our chapter on Government spending and welfare, for example, we discuss the way in which policy debates about benefit reform during the 1990s had a profound and lasting impact on public attitudes in general, and the views of Labour party supporters in particular. And the third type of factor concerns social trends in behaviour; as we discuss later on, cohabitation rates in the 1980s were a fraction of their current levels, so someone forming their views about marriage and cohabitation now does so against a very different backdrop to the one that existed three decades ago.

But the general social, political and demographic context of the time is not the only reason why the public's views might shift. We also need to consider three other features. These differ from period effects in the sense that, theoretically, it is possible for them to have a dramatic long-term impact on societal views without *any* single person changing their mind about a particular issue. This is because all three involve changes in the prevalence of particular groups with distinctive views – thus as the proportion of people in these groups changes over time, so too do social attitudes. The three we focus on in this chapter concern generational change, the role of religion and the rise of the graduate.

The generation game

Young people tend to have more liberal and tolerant views than their elders

We will see later in the chapter that young people tend to have more liberal and tolerant views than their elders. This reflects the importance of the generation that a person is born into, the argument being that their formative experiences as they are growing up will indelibly shape their attitudes and values across a wide range of issues, and these attitudes will subsequently not shift very much as they get older. There are different possible explanations as to how this process might work and the nature of the impact it might have on people's values. One approach emphasises the 'political era' during which a particular generation comes of age, arguing that the distinctive political and economic atmosphere will have a lasting impact on those who were developing their political consciousness at that time (Mannheim, 1928). An alternative view is derived from the theory of 'postmaterialism' (Inglehart, 1977), arguing that different generations are shaped by 'formative affluence' – that is, the level of economic affluence and stability they experienced in their formative years. Alternatively, it may be that the sorts of period effects we have already described have an impact on everyone through a process of what has been called 'contagion', but have a particularly strong effect on younger generations (Jagodzinski and Dobbelaere, 1994).

If it is the case that each subsequent generation is more liberal than its predecessor, we should find that attitudes across society as a whole gradually change as older, less tolerant, generations die out and are replaced by generations with more liberal views. But in assessing whether or not this is the case we need to bear in mind that, on some issues, people's views may simply change as they get older, as depicted in the well-known quote attributed to Churchill: "If you're not a Liberal at twenty you have no heart, if you're not

a Conservative at forty you have no brain." If this is the case, the fact that a particular generation has a different view on an issue to an older one may simply reflect the lifecycle stage that that generation has reached and this will continue to shift as they get older.

The ideal way of untangling lifecycle and generational differences is to use data from a panel survey in which the same people are interviewed repeatedly over time. However, although the British Social Attitudes survey interviews a fresh sample of people every year, its longevity means that we can use it to trace the attitudes of particular cohorts of people and assess the extent to which their attitudes change or remain stable over time (for more information about cohort analysis please see the Technical details chapter).

There are countless ways of defining 'generations', with recent attention focusing particularly on 'Generation Y', born in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the more well-known baby boomer and pre-war generations (Ipsos Mori, 2012). This focus can be illuminating but can also mask important differences that exist within particular generations, particularly within the otherwise large baby boomer and pre-war generations. For that reason, we have chosen to categorise people by their decade of birth.

Declining religious attachment

48%

have no religion, compared with 31 per cent in 1983

In the introduction to this chapter we outlined the important role that the Church has played in shaping people's attitudes towards the choices they make in their relationships (or whether indeed such choices are possible) – whether to cohabit, to have children outside marriage or to have a sexual relationship with someone of the opposite sex. In each section we will consider the influence that religion still has on people's views and how this has changed over time.

Changing patterns of religiosity, as measured by a question we have included in the survey since 1983 about religious belonging, are shown in Table 1.1. The key headline is obvious; religious belonging in Britain has declined since 1983, with a steady increase in the proportion of people who do not regard themselves as belonging to *any* religion, up from 31 per cent in 1983 to 48 per cent in 2012. This increase is almost entirely mirrored by a decline in the proportion of people who describe themselves as belonging to the Church of England, down from 40 per cent in 1983 to 20 per cent now. The proportion of people who describe themselves as Catholic or as belonging to another Christian religion has changed little over the period, while the proportion who belong to non-Christian religions has grown, from two per cent in 1983 to six per cent now.

Table 1.1 Religious affiliation, 1983–2012

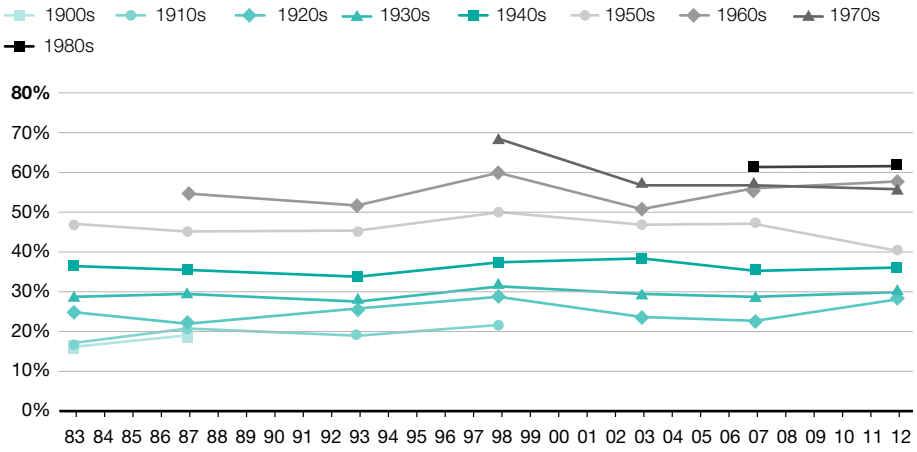
	83	84	85	86	87	89	90	91	93	94	95	96	97	98
Religion	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Church of England/ Anglican	40	39	36	37	37	37	37	36	32	33	32	29	27	27
Roman Catholic	10	12	11	10	10	11	9	10	11	9	9	9	11	9
Other Christian	17	14	17	16	16	16	14	15	16	15	15	15	14	14
Non-Christian	2	2	2	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	3
No religion	31	32	34	34	34	34	36	35	37	38	40	43	43	45
Weighted base	*1719*	*1645*	*1769*	*2766*	*2766*	*2930*	*2698*	*2836*	*2945*	*3469*	*3633*	*3620*	*1355*	*3146*
Unweighted base	*1761*	*1675*	*1804*	*3100*	*2847*	*3029*	*2797*	*2918*	*2945*	*3469*	*3633*	*3620*	*1355*	*3146*

	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12
Religion	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Church of England/ Anglican	27	30	29	31	27	29	26	22	21	23	20	20	21	20
Roman Catholic	9	9	11	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
Other Christian	16	16	14	14	15	15	18	16	18	18	15	15	17	17
Non-Christian	3	5	4	4	6	3	6	6	6	7	5	6	7	6
No religion	44	40	41	41	43	43	40	46	46	43	51	50	46	48
Weighted base	*3143*	*3426*	*3287*	*3435*	*4432*	*3199*	*4268*	*4290*	*4124*	*4486*	*3421*	*3297*	*3311*	*3248*
Unweighted base	*3143*	*3426*	*3287*	*3435*	*4432*	*3199*	*4268*	*4290*	*4124*	*4486*	*3421*	*3297*	*3311*	*3248*

Each generation tends to be slightly less religious than the one that preceded it

These trends are closely linked to the generational differences we have just described. Figure 1.1 illustrates this by showing the proportion in each generation who say they do not identify with any religion, and how this has changed over time. It shows that each generation tends to be slightly less religious than the one that preceded it, and that levels of religiosity do not vary very much over the lifetime of a generation. So, while less than three in ten of those born in the 1930s did not identify with any religion throughout their lifetime (26 per cent in 1983; 27 per cent in 2012), this was the case for around six in ten of those born in the 1960s (58 per cent in 1983; 56 per cent now). And, although we do not have complete data for later generations, there are clear signs that these trends are set to continue.

Figure 1.1 Proportion with no religion, by generation cohort, 1983–2012



The data on which Figure 1.1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter
Data are only presented for those generation cohorts with an unweighted base of at least 100 in a given year

We would anticipate these trends to be linked with increasingly liberal attitudes towards personal relationships and sexual behaviour over time, with less emphasis on 'traditional' behaviour. Later on we will look at the extent to which this is true.

The growth of the graduate

We have seen huge changes in levels of education in Britain, with the most pronounced change being the rise in the proportion of young people going into higher education

The last 30 years have seen huge changes in levels of education in Britain, with the most pronounced change being the rise in the proportion of young people going into higher education. These changes are clearly reflected in the survey findings. Back in 1985, when we first started asking detailed questions about education, only seven per cent of participants were graduates and nearly half, 45 per cent, had no qualifications at all. By 2012, the number with degrees had tripled (to 21 per cent), while the number with no qualifications fell to 19 per cent.

For the purposes of this chapter, these changes matter because of the relationship that exists between graduate-level education and liberal values across a range of areas. There are various factors that might account for this, including the impact of education on an individual's cognitive development and/or the absorption of liberal values as part of the socialisation experience of being a student (Surridge, 2010). Consequently, we might expect to see increasingly liberal views about the sorts of issues being considered in this chapter as higher education has expanded.[2]

The changing educational profile of Britain is closely linked to age, with younger generations containing more graduates than older ones, and older generations containing more people without any qualifications than younger ones.

There are various ways in which we can try and tease out the relative importance of generation, religion and education, and we explore these later. But here we flag a couple of patterns to which we will pay particular attention. The first relates to whether we find notable and constant differences between the attitudes of the different groups we are interested in, with these changing little over the last 30 years. In these circumstances, a change in the number of people in one of these groups (for example, a generation dying out, or a decline in the proportion of Anglicans) will be a strong candidate for explaining changes in attitudes. The second relates to whether or not any of the groups of particular interest have themselves changed their views over time as, if they have, it means any trends

we have identified cannot be accounted for by the changing composition or prevalence of those particular groups alone.

Marriage matters?

Discussion of the social significance of marriage rarely leaves the headlines. This is particularly true when the topic concerns children, as shown by the long-running debates about whether or not parents' choice to cohabit rather than marry has a negative impact on their children's social and developmental outcomes (Goodman and Greaves, 2010). Most recently, the passage of the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Bill through the House of Commons and subsequently through the House of Lords in 2013 attracted ferocious debates among both Conservative MPs and the party faithful more generally. Many opponents couched their opposition to the Bill by reference to the 'sanctity' of heterosexual marriage, the union between a man and woman that has long been the social, legal and religious norm – and for many the ideal – when it comes to sex and parenthood.

28%

thought premarital sex was wrong in 1983. This is now 11 per cent

Despite these debates, the last 30 years have seen huge changes in Britain's marital behaviour, with an increasing proportion of people either delaying getting married or not marrying at all. Between 1983 and 2010 the marriage rate in England and Wales (which is the number of marriages among every 1000 unmarried men and women aged 16 and over) more than halved, from 52 to 22 (among men) and 42 to 20 (among women) (Office for National Statistics, 2012a). This partly reflects an increasing tendency for couples to cohabit, either as a precursor to, or instead of, marriage. When the British Social Attitudes survey began in 1983, the majority of couples did not live together before tying the knot; this applied to only a minority, around three in ten. Now, it is those who get married *without* living together first who are unusual. In 2004–2007 around eight in ten first-time married couples lived together first (Beaujouan and Ni Bhrolchain, 2011). As a result, cohabitation rates have increased considerably; between 1996 and 2012 the number of cohabiting heterosexual couples increased from 1.5 to 2.9 million, and the number of dependent children living in these households doubled, from 0.9 to 1.8 million (Office for National Statistics, 2012b).

It would be surprising if such major societal shifts were not accompanied by fundamental changes in the way that we think about marriage and its role. In this section we explore this by focusing on two issues: the acceptability of sex outside marriage, and views about whether marriage and parenthood should go hand in hand. We begin with attitudes to premarital sex. To assess this we ask the following question:

> *If a man and woman have sexual relations before marriage, what would your general opinion be?*

In 1983, 28 per cent thought such premarital sex was "always" or "mostly wrong"; since then, the figure has now more than halved, to 11 per cent. In the meantime, the proportion who think sex before marriage is "not wrong at all" has increased markedly, from 42 to 65 per cent (a further 10 per cent think it is "rarely wrong").

Table 1.2 Sex before marriage, 1983–2012

	83	84	85	87	89	90	93	95	98
Views on sex before marriage	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Always wrong	16	15	14	13	12	13	10	8	8
Mostly wrong	11	12	9	12	11	10	8	9	8
Sometimes wrong	17	19	19	22	20	20	13	16	12
Rarely wrong	8	6	9	7	11	9	10	10	10
Not wrong at all	42	42	43	42	44	45	54	51	58
Weighted base	*1719*	*1645*	*1769*	*1391*	*1469*	*1353*	*1493*	*1180*	*1079*
Unweighted base	*1761*	*1675*	*1804*	*1437*	*1513*	*1397*	*1484*	*1172*	*1075*

	99	00	03	05	06	07	10	12
Views on sex before marriage	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Always wrong	8	9	8	6	6	6	6	6
Mostly wrong	6	8	6	7	7	5	5	5
Sometimes wrong	17	10	10	11	12	12	11	9
Rarely wrong	10	9	9	8	10	10	9	10
Not wrong at all	52	62	63	63	60	62	62	65
Weighted base	*1056*	*3426*	*2148*	*2101*	*1089*	*1042*	*1083*	*1099*
Unweighted base	*1052*	*3426*	*2139*	*2102*	*1093*	*1030*	*1081*	*1103*

We also ask participants their views about the acceptability of extramarital sex, defined as "a married person having sexual relations with someone other than his or her partner". Here there has been very little change over the last 30 years; with the vast majority, consistently eight in ten or more (84 per cent in 2012), seeing this kind of behaviour as always or mostly wrong. So, while sex outside marriage is acceptable to the majority of the British public, there is a continued commitment to marital fidelity – that people who are married should be faithful to their partner.

Traditionally one of marriage's key functions has been parenthood. Earlier we saw that the proportion of children being born outside marriage has increased sharply since the early 1980s and, to some extent, this behaviour change is reflected in trends in attitudes. One of the ways in which we assess this is by asking people whether they agree or disagree with the following statement:

People who want children ought to get married

As Table 1.3 shows, when we first asked the question in 1989, seven in ten (70 per cent) people agreed with this view (with 25 per cent agreeing strongly) while less than two in ten (17 per cent) disagreed. Over the last few decades opinions have shifted considerably; now 42 per cent agree (nine per cent strongly) while around a third (34 per cent) disagree. Notably, the proportion of people who opt for the middle ground of neither agree nor disagree has increased too, from one in ten in 1989 to more than two in ten now.

Table 1.3 People who want children ought to get married, 1989–2012

	1989	1994	2000	2002	2010	2012
People who want children ought to get married	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree strongly	25	18	21	14	13	9
Agree	46	39	33	37	29	33
Neither agree nor disagree	10	14	19	17	23	23
Disagree	14	21	20	22	25	27
Disagree strongly	3	6	6	8	8	7
Weighted base	*1274*	*1000*	*2991*	*1984*	*930*	*953*
Unweighted base	*1307*	*984*	*2980*	*1960*	*921*	*950*

The most prevalent view remains that marriage should precede parenthood

This change marks a shift in a more liberal direction, but it is clear that opinion is more evenly divided than was the case for premarital sex. Indeed, the most prevalent view remains that marriage should precede parenthood. This more nuanced view about marriage once children enter the equation has been noted before (Duncan and Phillips, 2008) and is evident in responses to other questions included on the survey. For instance, between 1994 and 2006 we asked people to respond to the statement "one parent can bring up a child as well as two parents together". In 1994, just over a third (35 per cent) agreed with this view, while 46 per cent disagreed; by 2006 there had been a slight shift, with agreement going up to 39 per cent and disagreement down to 40 per cent; nevertheless, opinion remained divided on the issue.

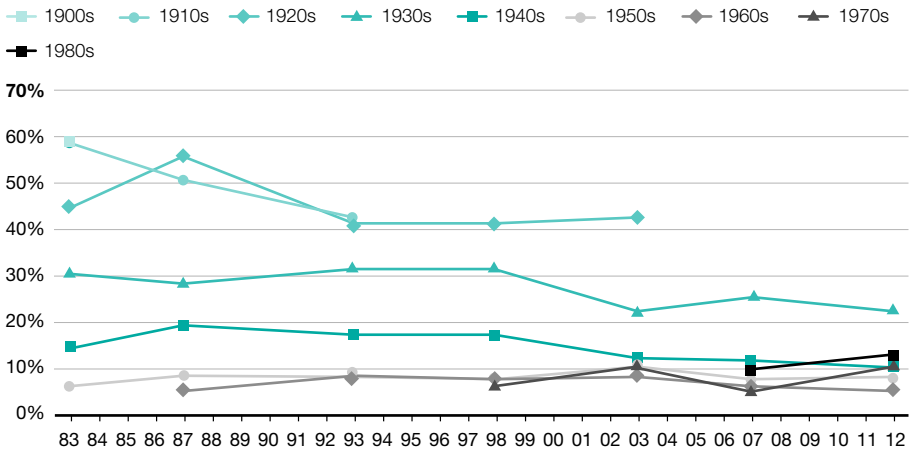
So far we have seen that, although marriage continues to be seen as a prerequisite for sex only by a small minority, more doubts remain about moving away from the traditional family when it comes to bringing up children. We turn now to consider what best accounts for these changes over time, trying where possible to identify the relative importance of generational differences, religion and education.

We start by looking at generational differences. In the case of premarital sex, if we simply look at attitudes by generation, there is now less clear-cut variation by age than in the past, even though in earlier years younger people were notably more liberal than their elders. The closing of what was once a huge generation gap is illustrated in Figure 1.2. It shows that in 1983 there were considerable generation gaps in people's views about premarital sex, with differences of over 10 percentage points between the views of those born in each of the five decades between 1900 and 1950. This contrasts clearly with the generations born in the 1950s and 1960s, who had very similar views to one another. This tendency for each new generation to have similar views to its predecessor has continued since then, as illustrated by the fact that the lines for the generations born after 1950 are very close to one another.

Figure 1.2 also allows us to follow a particular generation and look at how their views have changed. We can focus, for example, on those who were born in the 1950s and compare their views in 1983 (when they were in their late 20s and early 30s) with their subsequent views in 2012 (when they were aged between 53 and 62). This allows us to see whether a generation has become more liberal as it has aged – which in this case would be indicated by a downward line in the graph (as happened for instance for the 1930s and 1940s generations between the late 1990s and 2003).

These trends mean that the gulf that existed in 1983 between the views of different generations has shrunk dramatically. In 1983, just six per cent of the generation born in the 1950s thought premarital sex was always or mostly wrong, compared with 59 per cent of the group born between 1900 and 1909, a huge gap of 53 percentage points. Now the gap between our oldest generation (born in the 1930s) and the youngest (born in the 1980s) stands at just nine percentage points (with 22 and 13 per cent respectively thinking that premarital sex is wrong). It is these sharp generational differences that account for the large shift in public opinion we have seen over the last 30 years, as older, less liberal, generations have died out and been gradually replaced by younger, more liberal, ones.

Figure 1.2 Proportion saying premarital sex is wrong, by generation cohort, 1983–2012

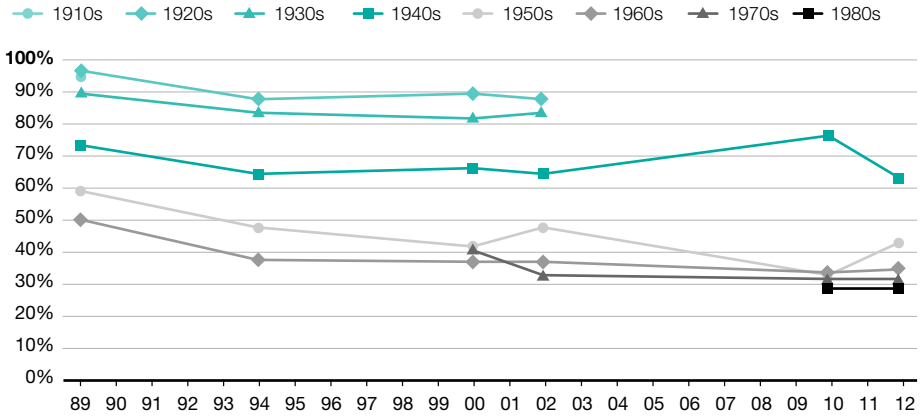


The data on which Figure 1.2 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter
Data are only presented for those generation cohorts with an unweighted base of at least 100 in a given year

The three youngest generations are far closer together in their views on premarital sex than previous generations are to one another

A different pattern emerges when we look at attitudes to having children outside marriage. Here distinct generational differences have persisted over time; indeed, they are just as marked in 2012 as they were in 1983. Take, for instance, the results for each generation in 2012 in Figure 1.3. They show that 28 per cent of the 1980s generation think people should get married before having children, rising to 31 per cent among the 1970s generation, 34 per cent of the 1960s generation and so on, until we hit highs of 62 and 84 per cent respectively among those born in the 1940s and 1930s. Although looking at earlier years it is clear that most generations have become slightly more liberal on this issue over time (indicated by a downward slope on the graph), the gap between the views of old and young is now actually wider than it has ever been. Note too that, as with attitudes to premarital sex, the three youngest generations are far closer together in their views than previous generations are to one another. These findings suggest that we will continue to see attitudes in this area become more liberal over time, as older generations die out, perhaps slowing at the point when the 1960s generation start to become the elder statesmen and women among Britain's generations (that is, from the 2040s onwards).

Figure 1.3 Agreement that people who want children ought to get married, by generation cohort, 1989–2012



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Earlier, we set out why we would expect to find a link between religious faith and people's attitudes to personal relationships. This indeed proves to be the case for attitudes to marriage (Table 1.4). When it comes to attitudes to premarital sex we find non-Christians at one end of the spectrum (although the small sample sizes involved mean these figures should be treated with caution). This group stands out as the most disapproving of premarital sex, with just over half in 2012 thinking it is always or mostly wrong. Those affiliating to other religions are more tolerant; around one in ten Anglicans and Catholics think that sex before marriage is wrong, a view shared with one in five of those belonging to other Christian religions. The most tolerant of all are the non-religious; out of the 500 odd people we interviewed who defined themselves in that category, two per cent (10 people) said they thought that premarital sex was wrong.

Among Anglicans the proportion thinking premarital sex is wrong is now a third of what it was in 1983

All religious groups, with the exception of non-Christians, have become more accepting of premarital sex over the last 30 years. Among Anglicans, for instance, the proportion thinking premarital sex is wrong is now a third of what it was in 1983 (10 and 31 per cent respectively). Among non-Christians opinions are now *less* tolerant than they were, bearing in mind the caveats mentioned earlier with regard to small sample sizes.

Table 1.4 Premarital sex, by religion, 1983–2012[3]

% saying premarital sex is always/mostly wrong	1983	1993	2003	2012	Change 1983–2012
Religion					
Church of England/Anglican	31	18	15	10	-21
Roman Catholic	32	26	16	11	-22
Other Christian	49	33	28	21	-27
Non-Christian	29	46	45	54	+24
No religion	11	5	5	2	-8

When it comes to the acceptability of parenthood outside marriage there is far more similarity of view between those from different religious faiths (Table 1.5). The key difference here is between those who are religious and those who are not. For instance, over half of Anglicans (54 per cent) agree with the view that people should get married before having children, compared with just 30 per cent of the non-religious.

This link between attitudes and religion offers at least a partial explanation for the generational changes we saw earlier, as older generations are far more likely than younger ones to be religious. However, Britain's increasing liberalism about premarital sex and parenthood outside marriage cannot be solely put down to the fact that religious adherence has fallen over time, as this does not account for the fact that most religious groups have themselves become more accepting over the last 30 years.

Education is no longer strongly linked to a person's views about premarital sex

Education is no longer strongly linked to a person's views about premarital sex; although in the 1980s graduates were more liberal than other groups on this matter, the views of all groups defined by educational qualification have become steadily more liberal over time. However, the picture is less clear-cut when it comes to attitudes to parenthood and marriage. Here the most liberal views of all are held by those whose highest qualification is a school-based one (that is, A levels or GCSEs, or their equivalent). Among those for whom A levels are their highest qualification, 35 per cent think people should get married before having children, compared with 41 per cent of graduates (the next most tolerant group) and 55 per cent of those without any qualifications (the least tolerant). On this issue then, the growth in the number of graduates does not help us account for increasingly liberal views about sex and marriage.

Table 1.5 People who want children ought to get married, by education, 1989–2012[4]

% agree people who want children ought to get married	1989	1994	2002	2012	Change 1989–2012
Education level					
Degree	66	55	49	41	- 26
Higher education below degree	74	65	56	42	- 32
A level or equivalent	57	51	40	35	- 23
GCSE/O level or equivalent	58	46	38	39	- 19
CSE or equivalent	62	45	55	34	- 28
No qualifications	79	67	64	55	- 24

In summary, views about marriage have become more liberal over time. When it comes to sex outside marriage, there is a considerable unanimity of opinion, with only religion and, to some extent, generation still being clearly linked to differences in views now. In contrast, there remain marked differences between the views of different groups on marriage and parenthood, with age, religion and education remaining clear markers of a person's views on the subject. The shifts we have seen over time are mainly accounted for by generational change; although declining religious faith is in itself linked to generational differences, increasing secularisation is an insufficient explanation of the changes we have found. Education, although partly linked to a person's views on marriage and parenthood, is not an important factor in explaining the huge changes we have seen over time. Although it is hard to find clear evidence of the way in which

period effects have influenced people's attitudes, the close correlation between marriage behaviour and attitudes suggests that, rather than having a simple causal relationship, the two are influenced by one another; so attitudes will help shape behaviour, and behaviour (or exposure to behaviour) will in turn shape attitudes.

Of course attitudes to personal relationships may well be influenced by other factors beyond those we have considered here. Our Social class chapter examines attitudes to premarital sex in the context of its investigation into the changing role of social class in shaping people's attitudes. Multivariate analysis there shows that age, ethnicity and church attendance (in 1984 and 2012) and gender (in 2012) are all highly significant predictors of a person's views about premarital sex, even when a range of other measures are taken into account. The effect of age on attitudes appears to have weakened over time, while the effect of church attendance has strengthened. These trends support the findings we have described above, which show how the views of different religious groups have diverged over time, while the attitudes of different generations have become less distinct.

We finally examine the extent to which party affiliation is linked to people's views, to see what light this sheds on current political debates about marriage and the family (Table 1.6). To do this we use a series of questions that, together, measure the extent to which people readily identify or not with a particular party, their 'party identification' (see our Politics chapter for more details).[5] While there are no such differences associated with attitudes to premarital sex, there are clear differences between the views of supporters of the main political parties when it comes to marriage and parenthood. Conservative Party supporters are the most likely to think people who want to have children should get married; over six in ten think this, far higher than the rates found among Liberal Democrats and Labour supporters (three in ten and four in ten respectively). The most liberal of all are those who do not support any party, no doubt reflecting their younger than average age profile.

6 in 10

Conservative supporters think people who want to have children should get married

Table 1.6 People who want children ought to get married, by party identification, 1989–2012[6]

% agree people who want children ought to get married	1989	1994	2002	2012	Change 1989–2012
Party identification					
Conservative	78	67	68	63	- 15
Labour	63	55	46	40	- 23
Liberal Democrat	77	60	52	31	- 46
None	54	42	38	23	- 32

Conservative supporters also stand out as having changed the least in their views, although the make-up of those supporting a particular party will of course have changed over the years. While the proportion who think that people should get married before having children has fallen by 15 percentage points between 1989 and 2012, this compares with a drop of 23 percentage points among Labour supporters. As a result, Conservative Party supporters have diverged from supporters of other political parties in their views on this matter over time. Indeed, they are now nearly three times more likely than those

who do not support any party to think that parents should be married. David Cameron's decision to balance his social liberalism on issues such as gay rights with a continued emphasis on the importance of marriage is very much in line with the views of the Conservative Party faithful; it does however beg the question as to where new party support might come from, particularly given the trends towards increased liberalism on family issues that are likely to continue into the near future.

Homosexuality

In 2013 public attitudes towards homosexuality hit the headlines once again, as a result of the debates surrounding the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Bill, providing a good illustration of the tension between David Cameron's desire to promote socially liberal conservatism on issues such as gay rights and a socially authoritarian, and highly vocal, section of his party (Hayton, 2010). These debates are not confined to the UK; earlier in 2013, a reported 150,000 people marched in Paris to protest against a similar law being enacted there.

It is worth reminding ourselves of how much Britain has changed in relation to homosexuality. Before the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, male homosexuality had been illegal. One hundred years earlier it had been a capital offence. But, despite its decriminalisation in 1967 (for men aged 21 and over), stigma and prejudice against gay men and lesbians remained widespread over the subsequent decades and prevented many from openly expressing their sexuality. This is not the place for an exhaustive history, but it is worth flagging some events and debates of particular relevance to the 30 year period covered by the British Social Attitudes survey. In the 1980s, two events in particular stand out; the arrival of HIV AIDS and the introduction of Section 28. The first round of the British Social Attitudes survey took place in 1983, a point at which there was intense media scrutiny of what was then a new and frightening disease; acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). In 1982, Terrence Higgins became one of the first UK fatalities and the years that followed saw frequent (and often incorrect) scares about how the HIV virus could be transmitted (Wellings, 1988) as well a frequent distinction being made between those who were 'innocent' victims (for example, contracting the HIV virus through blood transfusions) and those, like gay men or intravenous drug-users, who were seen to have 'chosen' to place themselves at risk through their behaviour (Beharrell, 1993).

Despite its decriminalisation in 1967, stigma and prejudice against gay men and lesbians remained widespread over the subsequent decades

Moving forward a few years to the 1987 Conservative Party conference brings us to another landmark debate of the 1980s. In her speech to the party faithful, Margaret Thatcher remarked "Children who need to be taught to respect traditional moral values are being taught that they have an inalienable right to be gay".[7] These concerns heralded the introduction of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, which stated that local government "shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality" or "promote the teaching in state schools of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship".

The 1990s saw breakthroughs in the medical treatment of AIDS and HIV. The first gay pride events took place in Manchester (1990), Brighton (1992) and London (Europride, 1992), and an increasing number of public figures came out as gay or announced that they were HIV positive. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 reduced the age of consent for homosexual sex from 21

to 18. After years of wrangling between the House of Commons and House of Lords, the age of consent was eventually lowered to 16 in 2001. Section 28 was eventually repealed in England and Wales as part of the Local Government Act 2003 (its Scottish equivalent having been repealed a few years earlier in 2000). The following year the Civil Partnership Act 2004 gave same-sex couples the same rights and responsibilities as married heterosexual couples in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales (the first civil partnership took place the following year). In 2013, the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Bill was introduced to Parliament and at the time of writing is being considered by the House of Lords; in the same year the Scottish Parliament introduced its own Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Bill. As a result of these, and other legislative changes, lesbian and gay rights in Britain have strengthened considerably, and are seen as being among the best in Europe.[8]

In 1983 one in every two people took the most critical view possible, that same-sex relations were "always wrong"

What might these changes mean for public attitudes? Certainly, we might expect to find that attitudes have become much more tolerant over time, in line with legislative change and an increasing willingness among public figures to be open about being gay. But we might also expect this path to be a bumpy one, perhaps reflecting the debates about homosexuality that accompanied discussions about AIDS in the 1980s. This indeed proves to be the case. Back in 1983, we asked people what they thought of "sexual relations between adults of the same sex". Their responses, and those obtained in subsequent years, are presented in Table 1.7. In 1983, half – one in every two people – took the most critical view possible, that such behaviour was "always wrong". An additional one in ten thought it was "mostly wrong" and less than two in ten thought it "not wrong at all". The view that homosexuality was wrong grew over the decade – by 1987, nearly two-thirds thought it was *always* wrong, no doubt at least partly reflecting some of the debates surrounding HIV AIDS. Since then, attitudes have become far more tolerant – the proportion thinking homosexuality is always wrong is now a third of that in 1987, while the 11 per cent who took the most relaxed view possible back then (that homosexuality was not wrong at all) has more than quadrupled to 47 per cent.

Table 1.7 Views on homosexuality, 1983–2012

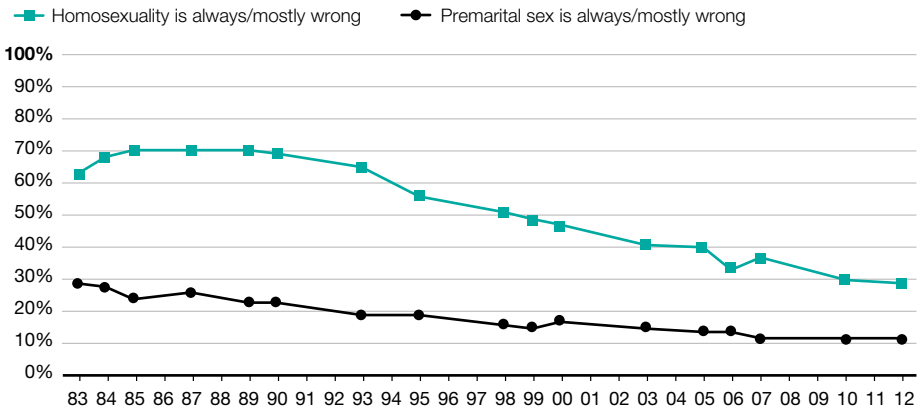
	83	84	85	87	89	90	93	95	98
Sexual relations between two adults of the same sex	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Always wrong	50	54	59	64	56	58	50	44	39
Mostly wrong	12	13	10	11	13	11	14	11	11
Sometimes wrong	8	7	7	8	9	8	7	10	11
Rarely wrong	4	2	4	2	4	4	5	7	8
Not wrong at all	17	16	12	11	14	15	18	22	23
Weighted base	*1719*	*1645*	*1769*	*1391*	*1469*	*1353*	*1493*	*1180*	*1079*
Unweighted base	*1761*	*1675*	*1804*	*1437*	*1513*	*1397*	*1484*	*1172*	*1075*

	99	00	03	05	06	07	10	12
Sexual relations between two adults of the same sex	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Always wrong	38	37	31	27	24	26	20	22
Mostly wrong	11	9	9	12	9	10	10	6
Sometimes wrong	9	9	9	8	11	7	8	7
Rarely wrong	7	7	7	9	11	10	8	10
Not wrong at all	27	34	37	37	38	39	45	47
Weighted base	*1056*	*3426*	*2148*	*2101*	*1089*	*1042*	*1083*	*1099*
Unweighted base	*1052*	*3426*	*2139*	*2102*	*1093*	*1030*	*1081*	*1103*

Societal attitudes to homosexuality remain markedly less liberal than attitudes to premarital sex

Figure 1.4 compares trends in attitudes to homosexuality with attitudes to premarital sex. Three points emerge. Firstly, and very obviously, societal attitudes to homosexuality were (and remain) markedly less liberal than attitudes to premarital sex. Secondly, although opinion on premarital sex became progressively more liberal throughout the 1980s, this was a decade during which attitudes to homosexuality hardened, for the reasons highlighted earlier. And thirdly, views about premarital sex seem to have stabilised since 2007 while attitudes to homosexuality are continuing to become more liberal.

Figure 1.4 Views on premarital sex and homosexuality, 1983–2012



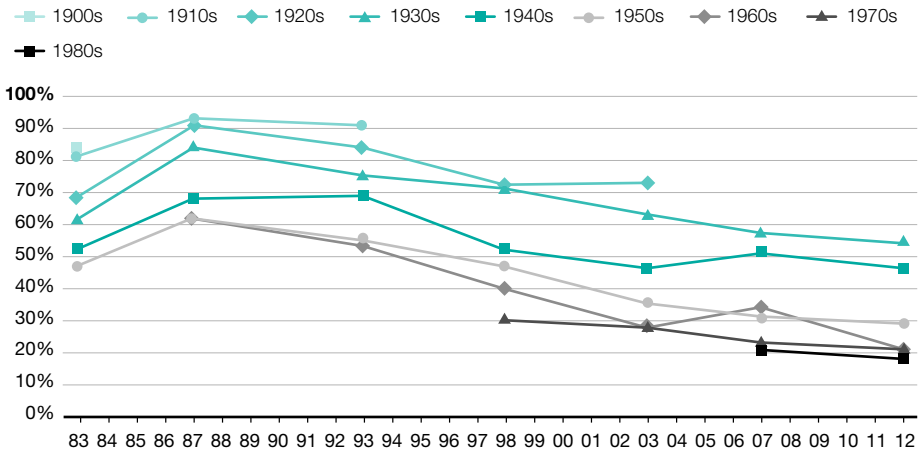
The data on which Figure 1.4 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

Each successive generation has more liberal views on homosexuality than the one before

We turn now to look at how opinion varies between different groups, focusing particularly on how attitudes among different groups have changed over time and what impact this has had on any gap between groups with particularly marked views. We start by looking at the views of different generations. These are shown in Figure 1.5 which illustrates clearly that each successive generation has more liberal views than the one before. In 2012, for instance, the 1980s generation are the least likely to think that homosexuality is always or mostly wrong; those born in the 1930s are the most likely to do so. This gradient from one generation to the next, combined with the exit of older, less liberal, generations and the arrival of newer, more liberal ones, largely accounts for the large shift in overall public opinion that has taken place – a decline of 34 points over three decades in the proportion who think homosexuality is always or mostly wrong. This shift will continue so long as these clear generational gradients exist, but should begin to slow down at the point when the 1960s generation becomes the oldest, as this generation and those that follow it have very similar views.

But generational change is not the whole story as, with the exception of the 1960s generation, each generation themselves became less tolerant between 1987 and 1993, for reasons that have been outlined already. The unique path of the 1960s generation is intriguing, suggesting that they were perhaps more resistant than older generations to the impact that debates around HIV AIDS (among other things) appear to have had on attitudes. However, if we focus on overall change between 1983 and 2012, it is clear that all generations have become notably more liberal over time. Among those born in the 1930s, for example, 61 per cent thought homosexuality was wrong in 1983, compared with 54 per cent among that generation now. The 1950s and 1960s generations in particular have become markedly more liberal on this issue over time.

Figure 1.5 Proportion saying homosexuality is wrong, by generation cohort, 1983–2012



The data on which Figure 1.5 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter
Data are only presented for those generation cohorts with an unweighted base of at least 100 in a given year

Not surprisingly, religious belief is closely linked to attitudes to homosexuality. Those who aren't religious are the least likely to see it as always or mostly wrong, only 16 per cent do so. This compares to disapproval rates of over a third among Anglicans (40 per cent) and Catholics (35 per cent). The highest disapproval of all is found among non-Christians, six in ten (61 per cent) of whom see homosexuality as always or mostly wrong (although these figures need to be treated with caution due to the small sample sizes involved).

Although tolerance of homosexuality has grown among all religious groups, it has grown most among those who are not religious

Although tolerance of homosexuality has grown among all religious groups, it has grown most among those who are not religious. As a result, the gap between the religious and non-religious on this issue is now far wider than in the past. In 1983, Anglicans were 1.2 times more likely than the non-religious to think homosexuality was wrong; now they are 2.6 times more likely. This stronger relationship between religiosity and attitudes to homosexuality is confirmed by multivariate analysis described in the social class chapter elsewhere in this report. As was the case with attitudes to premarital sex, these trends show that changing attitudes to homosexuality cannot be accounted for by the decline of religious faith within Britain alone; the fact that many religious people are more liberal now than they once were suggests that other forces are more important.

Education is also closely related to a person's attitudes towards homosexuality, with the most marked distinction being between those with and without qualifications. Graduates are the most tolerant of all; in 2012 one in five (19 per cent) thought homosexuality was always or mostly wrong, half the proportion (39 per cent) who took that view in 1985. The least tolerant are those without any qualifications; nearly half (47 per cent) in 2012 thought homosexuality was wrong, down from just over three-quarters (78 per cent) in 1985.

So far we have seen a clear liberal shift in attitudes to homosexuality, both across the public as a whole and among all the specific groups we have looked at. In the case of generation, religion and education these shifts have actually increased the gap between the most and least tolerant groups. As was the case with attitudes to marriage the key driver behind much of this change is generational, with each generation being successively more liberal than its predecessor. However, events also clearly matter, as shown by the impact that the arrival of AIDS in the 1980s appears to have had on people's attitudes, in the form of a hardening of mood likely to reflect the debates of the time.

Given some of the debates that have taken place among Conservative Party MPs and supporters about the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Bill, we might anticipate finding considerable differences between the views of their supporters and those of other parties. In fact, as Table 1.8 shows, party identification is not as strongly linked to people's views on homosexuality as some of the other characteristics we have considered. In fact, the difference between the proportion of Conservative and Labour Party supporters who think that homosexuality is wrong is not statistically significant; the main divide is between the supporters of these two main parties, on the one hand, and Liberal Democrats or those who do not support any party on the other, who are less likely to think homosexuality is wrong.

Supporters of all parties have become more tolerant of homosexuality over time

In line with what we have seen earlier, supporters of all parties have become more tolerant over time. Among the main political parties, the biggest change has taken place among Labour supporters; in 1983, 67 per cent thought homosexuality was always or mostly wrong, compared with 29 per cent now, a drop of 38 percentage points (a shift that largely took place between 1993 and 2003). Among Conservatives the overall decline has been somewhat lower, but it is worth flagging the dramatic change that took place among their supporters between 2003 and 2012, with the proportion thinking homosexuality is wrong falling from a half to just over a third. It is not clear how much of this we can attribute to the social liberalism of David Cameron, who was elected leader of the Conservative Party in the autumn of 2005. Might his views have persuaded party supporters to adopt a more liberal stance, or

even attracted those with a more liberal view to the party? Both are possible, but it is important to note that much of the increase in liberalism among Conservative supporters pre-dated Cameron's election as party leader, with the proportion thinking homosexuality is always or mostly wrong falling from 51 to 44 per cent between 2003 and 2005.

Table 1.8 Views on homosexuality, by party identification, 1983–2012[9]

% saying same-sex sexual relations always/mostly wrong	1983	1993	2003	2012
Party identification				
Conservative	61	68	51	35
Labour	67	63	38	29
Liberal Democrat	48	57	26	22
None	71	75	40	22

Earlier we saw that Conservative supporters were distinctively less liberal than other groups on the issue of parenthood and marriage. Perhaps not surprisingly then, they are also less enthusiastic than other groups about the idea of opening up marriage to same-sex couples. We asked people in 2012 whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement "Gay or lesbian couples should have the right to marry one another if they want to". Overall, 24 per cent agree strongly with this proposition while 33 per cent agree. Twenty-four per cent either disagree or disagree strongly. Conservatives were the least likely to agree strongly, only 17 per cent doing so, compared with 27 per cent of Labour party supporters and 39 per cent of Liberal Democrats.

Abortion

Abortion has been legal in Britain since the Abortion Act 1967, the result of a private member's bill brought by David Steel MP. It followed decades of campaigning by groups who were concerned about the ill health and loss of life that resulted from unsafe and illegal abortions. The 1967 Act allowed abortion under a number of specified circumstances in cases where the pregnancy had not exceeded its 28th week. The circumstances included the risk of the pregnancy to the woman's life, to her own physical or mental health, or that of her existing children. Abortion was also allowed if there was a significant risk that the child would be born with serious physical or mental disability.

The 1967 Act still governs abortions in England, Scotland and Wales. Changes were introduced in 1990 through the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act. In particular, the time limits in the original Act were reduced from 28 to 24 weeks, to reflect advances in medical science. The Act also clarified the circumstances under which abortion could be obtained at a later stage (abortions after 24 weeks were allowed if there is grave risk to the life of the woman, evidence of severe foetal abnormality or risk of grave physical and mental injury to the woman). In 2010, there were 17.5 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15–44 resident in Britain, more than double the rate of 8.0 recorded in 1970.[10]

Abortion remains a hugely controversial subject

Abortion remains a hugely controversial subject and, since 1967, members of Parliament have introduced a number of private member's bills to change the abortion law. Four resulted in substantive debate but all failed. In 2008, MPs voted on cutting the limit for the first time since 1990. MPs were given a free vote on the issue, with calls being made for a reduction to 12, 16, 20 or 22 weeks; MPs voted to retain the current legal limit of 24 weeks. In 2012, the Conservative Health Minister Jeremy Hunt reignited the debate by suggesting that he favoured a reduction in the legal time limit from 24 to 12 weeks; other ministers were quick to deny there were any plans to review the current legal limit although senior figures within the party, including David Cameron, suggested that they would favour a reduction in the legal limit.

The British Social Attitudes survey has asked a number of questions about abortion over the past 30 years. Here, we focus on two that represent the extremes at either end of the debate. Both focus on the acceptability or otherwise of abortion under particular circumstances, without broaching the issue of weekly limits. The first puts forward a situation that is clearly covered by the current Abortion Act – that a woman whose health is seriously endangered by her pregnancy be allowed to have an abortion. The second puts forward a more stretching scenario, one which is not in itself currently covered by the Abortion Act:

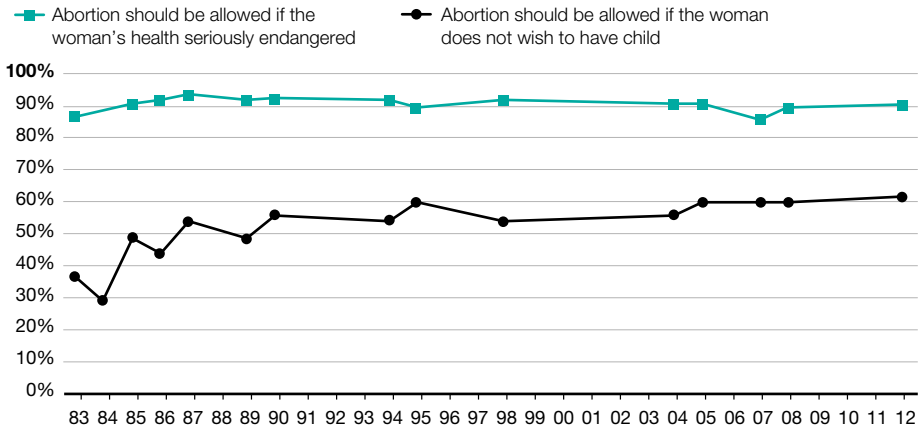
Do you think the law should allow an abortion when …

… the woman's health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy?
… the woman decides on her own she does not wish to have the child?

Just over half of the public in 1983 opposed abortion being available if a woman does not want a child, while nearly two-thirds support this now

Responses to these questions are presented in Figure 1.6. They show almost unanimous support for a woman's right to have an abortion if her own health would be seriously endangered by going ahead with the pregnancy. Nine in ten people (90 per cent) agree with this view in 2012, barely changed from the 87 per cent who agreed in 1983. However, levels of support for abortion in the circumstances set out in the second question are lower, with just over six in ten (62 per cent) supporting and a third (34 per cent) opposing. However, this marks a considerable change since 1983; at that time 37 per cent thought the law should allow this while just over half (55 per cent) thought it should not. In other words, just over half of the public in 1983 opposed abortion being available if a woman does not want a child, while nearly two-thirds support this now.

Figure 1.6 Views on whether an abortion should be allowed in different circumstances, 1983–2012

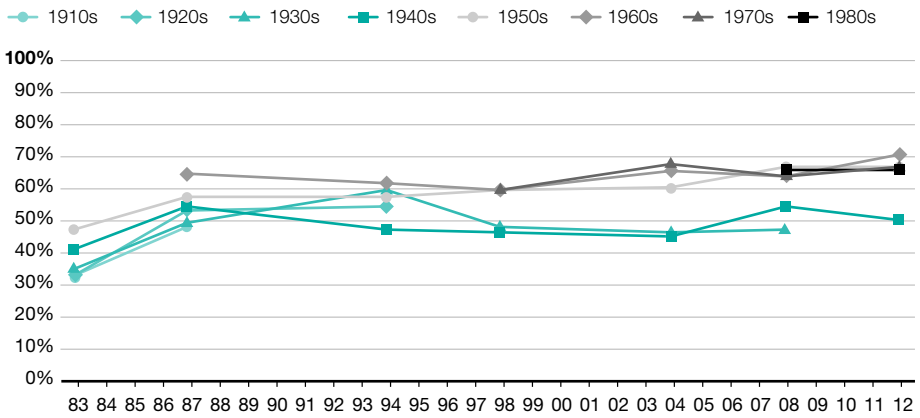


The data on which Figure 1.6 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

Most generations are more supportive of abortion now than they were in 1983

We now turn to look at how the attitudes of particular groups have changed, focusing on views about the acceptability of abortion in those cases when the woman does not want the child. We start by looking at whether there are any generational differences on this issue (Figure 1.7). Compared with the earlier generational analyses, the picture here is less clear-cut. However, there are some generational differences in 2012, with more recent generations being more supportive of a woman's right to choose under these circumstances, and older generations, especially those born in the 1940s and 1930s being somewhat less supportive (with 49 and 56 per cent respectively supporting abortion, compared with 61 per cent of those born in the 1990s). But the differences are not huge, and the gaps between the most and least supportive groups have not changed much since 1983. It is also clear in the graph that most generations are more supportive now than they were in 1983; among the 1960s generation, for instance, support for abortion under those particular circumstances rose from 45 to 69 per cent. However, while support for abortion rose between 1983 and 1987 (and in some cases 1994) among all generations, it subsequently fell between 1994 and 2004 among older generations but continued to rise among those born during and after the 1950s. This distinction is intriguing and perhaps reflects the impact of the debates that foreshadowed the 1967 Abortion Act (something likely to have had a particular impact on the 1950s generation) as well the subsequent availability of legal abortion (for the 1960s generation onwards). These findings suggest that the changes in attitudes we have seen since 1983 cannot primarily be explained by generational change.

Figure 1.7 Proportion saying an abortion should be allowed when the woman does not wish to have the child, by generation cohort, 1983–2012



The data on which Figure 1.7 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter
Data are only presented for those generation cohorts with an unweighted base of at least 100 in a given year

Religious faith continues to be closely associated with attitudes to abortion

Not surprisingly, religious faith continues to be closely associated with attitudes to abortion. Catholics are the least accepting, with only 39 per cent supporting a woman's right to terminate a pregnancy if she wishes to, compared with 56 per cent of Anglicans. The non-religious are the most supportive of all (73 per cent). But acceptance of abortion has increased among all religious groups since 1983; among Anglicans, for instance, 34 per cent supported abortion in these circumstances in 1983, rising to 54 per cent by 1994 and standing at 56 per cent now. So increasing secularism cannot explain Britain's liberalisation on the subject of abortion.

Two-thirds of graduates support abortion, compared with just over a half of those with no qualifications

Education is not as closely associated as other factors with attitudes to abortion. In general, the lowest level of support is found among those with no qualifications; beyond that the level of qualification makes little difference. Two-thirds (67 per cent) of graduates support abortion, compared with just over a half (53 per cent) of those with no qualifications. This broad pattern was also true in 1983; what is remarkable is that, since then, support for abortion among those with qualifications at GSCE level or below have barely changed, making them one of the few groups to have moved little in their views on this subject. For instance, among those with no qualifications at all, 49 per cent supported abortion in 1983, compared with 53 per cent now.

Overall, attitudes to abortion have become more supportive over the last three decades, although it is true to say that there was already widespread support in 1983 for abortion in cases where the continued pregnancy would endanger the woman's life. This is apparent among different generations, each of whom is now more supportive than they were in 1983. Increased support is also apparent among different religious groups, although religion remains linked to divergent views on the subject. On this issue then, changing attitudes cannot be explained by generation, religion or education; other factors underpin increasing liberalism on this matter.

Traditionally political votes on abortion are not subject to the party whip, allowing MPs to vote according to their own conscience. Our findings show that there are few party divisions on abortion, save a clear distinction between Liberal Democrat supporters and everyone else. In 2012, for instance, 82 per cent of Liberal Democrats support a woman's right to choose to have an abortion if she does not wish to have the child, compared with around six in ten Conservative and Labour Party supporters (57 and 61 per cent respectively) and 65 per cent of those who do not support any party.

Conclusions

In many respects, the public's attitudes to personal relationships in 2012 look dramatically different to those that existed 30 years ago

In many respects, the public's attitudes to personal relationships in 2012 look dramatically different to those that existed 30 years ago. Perhaps nowhere is this more obvious than in relation to attitudes towards homosexuality. Then, nearly two in three people though homosexuality was always or mostly wrong, a figure that was to rise over the following decade, at least partly as a result of the debates surrounding the arrival of HIV AIDS. Since then, however, the proportion of people who take this view has halved, and the most prevalent opinion is now that homosexuality is not wrong at all. In this context it is possible to imagine a Conservative Prime Minister advocating gay marriage, something that would have been unimaginable in the 1980s. These shifts towards a more tolerant view about how people live their personal lives are not confined to attitudes to homosexuality, applying as well to Britain's views about sex and parenthood outside marriage, and abortion.

These huge shifts largely reflect the impact of generational differences in people's views (the exception being attitudes to abortion). This is clearest in relation to attitudes to premarital sex and homosexuality; in both cases each generation, defined by its decade of birth, is successively more liberal than the one before it, a relationship which has not changed as these generations age. Consequently, as older generations die out and are replaced by more liberal subsequent generations, society's view as a whole becomes more liberal. There

are likely to be many reasons for these generational differences; religious faith will undoubtedly play a part, as may increasing access to higher education, but so too does the context within which different generations come of age and form their own opinions about how to lead their lives, being influenced as they do so by an array of factors ranging from the policy context, social trends, popular culture and current events. The fact that those belonging to different religious groups have themselves tended to become more liberal over time certainly suggests that their declining numbers cannot alone account for an increasingly liberal Britain.

Of course, these trends do not mean that differences of opinion have been eliminated. The most common view about parenthood and marriage, held by four in ten, is that the two should ideally coincide. And, despite increasingly liberal views about homosexuality, a substantial minority, almost three in ten, continue to see it as always or mostly wrong. These views are not randomly distributed throughout the population either. In addition to marked generational gaps, differences still remain (and in some cases are growing) between the views of different religious groups. In particular, the distinctive views of non-Christians (who on many topics have among the least liberal views) points towards possible future tensions.

There are also clear differences by party support, with Conservative supporters remaining markedly more 'traditional' than anyone else in their views about parenthood and marriage, and Liberal Democrat supporters standing out as having the most liberal views about homosexuality and abortion. In most cases there is little difference between the views of Labour and Conservative supporters, and it is also notable that, with the exception of abortion, the (growing) proportion of people who do not support any party tend to have views that put them at the more liberal end of the spectrum. The differences between Conservative and Liberal Democrat supporters are not surprising, but demonstrate well some of the tensions that underpin the current Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition, as well as signposting the difficulties that the Conservative Party will need to face if it continues its push towards social liberalism.

The patterns we have described here do point fairly clearly towards the liberalisation we have already seen continuing over the next few decades

Predicting the future direction of society's attitudes is a risky business. The impact of HIV AIDS on attitudes towards homosexuality provides a very good example of the way in which unforeseen events can have a dramatic impact on how people think about a particular issue. But, with these appropriate caveats in place, the patterns we have described here do point fairly clearly towards the liberalisation we have already seen continuing over the next few decades, at least when it comes to subjects like homosexuality, parenthood and marriage. But the pace of this change will begin to slow down, reflecting the fact that the gaps between the views of more recent generations is narrower than the gulfs that existed between some of their predecessors.

Notes

1. BBC news, 17th February 2001, available at: news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/1175753.stm.
2. It is possible that the expansion of higher education will affect the relationship between degree-level education and social values, especially if the main mechanism by which education affects attitudes is socialisation (rather than cognitive development). So as a wider cross-section of young people attend university, the distinctive nature of their values is diluted.

3. Bases for Table 1.4 are as follows:

Premarital sex, by religion, 1983–2012

	1983	1993	2003	2012
Church of England/Anglican				
Weighted base	*684*	*538*	*575*	*228*
Unweighted base	*708*	*537*	*587*	*268*
Roman Catholic				
Weighted base	*164*	*143*	*195*	*87*
Unweighted base	*170*	*138*	*193*	*85*
Other Christian				
Weighted base	*293*	*257*	*296*	*174*
Unweighted base	*300*	*273*	*310*	*183*
Non-Christian				
Weighted base	*34*	*57*	*127*	*70*
Unweighted base	*32*	*49*	*99*	*52*
No religion				
Weighted base	*538*	*494*	*938*	*533*
Unweighted base	*544*	*481*	*932*	*506*

4. Bases for Table 1.5 are as follows:

People who want children ought to get married, by education, 1989–2012

	1989	1994	2002	2012
Degree				
Weighted base	*111*	*92*	*312*	*205*
Unweighted base	*113*	*94*	*304*	*178*
Higher education below degree				
Weighted base	*162*	*125*	*295*	*114*
Unweighted base	*169*	*122*	*293*	*118*
A level or equivalent				
Weighted base	*141*	*152*	*299*	*179*
Unweighted base	*137*	*135*	*265*	*154*
GCSE/O level or equivalent				
Weighted base	*218*	*219*	*382*	*160*
Unweighted base	*225*	*202*	*362*	*153*
CSE or equivalent				
Weighted base	*97*	*73*	*207*	*55*
Unweighted base	*101*	*76*	*211*	*54*
No qualifications				
Weighted base	*534*	*325*	*440*	*152*
Unweighted base	*550*	*338*	*475*	*197*

5. In summary, there has been a considerable rise since 1983 in the proportion who identify with no political party whatsoever, up from eight per cent in 1983 to 21 per cent now. The proportion of Conservative identifiers has shrunk (from 39 to 27 per cent) and the proportion of Labour identifiers has remained broadly constant (33 and 36 per cent in 1983 and 2012 respectively). In 1983, 15 per cent of people identified with the Liberal/SDP Alliance, compared with six per cent in 2012 identifying with the Liberal Democrats. Further details can be found in the Politics chapter.

6. Bases for Table 1.6 are as follows:

People who want children ought to get married, by party identification, 1989–2012

	1989	1994	2002	2012
Conservative				
Weighted base	*511*	*283*	*489*	*258*
Unweighted base	*518*	*285*	*496*	*270*
Labour				
Weighted base	*444*	*435*	*827*	*328*
Unweighted base	*454*	*417*	*810*	*312*
Liberal Democrat				
Weighted base	*135*	*139*	*235*	*72*
Unweighted base	*141*	*138*	*231*	*72*
None				
Weighted base	*83*	*66*	*236*	*165*
Unweighted base	*86*	*66*	*234*	*162*

7. Speech by Margaret Thatcher to the Conservative Party Conference, 1987, 9th October, available at: www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106941.

8. See, for example, the ILGA Europe review of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and intersex people in Europe, available at: www.ilga-europe.org/home/news/for_media/media_releases/not_la_vie_en_rose_the_most_comprehensive_overview_of_the_lgbti_people_rights_and_lives_in_europe_2013.

9. Bases for Table 1.8 are as follows:

Views on homosexuality, by party identification, 1983–2012

	1983	1993	2003	2012
Conservative				
Weighted base	*664*	*478*	*539*	*281*
Unweighted base	*676*	*470*	*537*	*298*
Labour				
Weighted base	*565*	*561*	*780*	*377*
Unweighted base	*584*	*560*	*783*	*361*
Liberal Democrat				
Weighted base	*133*	*194*	*242*	*76*
Unweighted base	*136*	*187*	*244*	*78*
None				
Weighted base	*104*	*120*	*352*	*213*
Unweighted base	*106*	*124*	*340*	*207*

10. The Guardian Datablog, 7th October 2012, available at: www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/may/24/abortion-statistics-england-wales.

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Appendix

The data for Figure 1.1 are shown below.

Table A.1 Proportion of people with no religion, by generation cohort, 1983–2012

	1983			1987			1993			1998	
		Weighted base	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*
All	31	*1719*	*1761*	34	*2766*	*2847*	37	*2945*	*2945*	45	*3146*	*3146*
Cohort												
1970s										67	*486*	*418*
1960s				55	*522*	*495*	50	*586*	*589*	58	*662*	*673*
1950s	45	*316*	*317*	43	*524*	*536*	43	*603*	*583*	48	*570*	*543*
1940s	34	*337*	*346*	33	*553*	*565*	31	*519*	*471*	35	*497*	*460*
1930s	26	*261*	*281*	27	*422*	*461*	25	*357*	*347*	29	*430*	*435*
1920s	22	*257*	*269*	19	*402*	*428*	23	*345*	*400*	26	*288*	*358*
1910s	14	*232*	*241*	18	*240*	*252*	16	*177*	*246*	19	*136*	*192*
1900s	13	*113*	*112*	16	*95*	*102*						

	2003			2007			2012		
		Weighted base	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*
All	43	*4432*	*4432*	46	*4124*	*4124*	48	*3248*	*3248*
Cohort									
1980s				60	*664*	*440*	60	*544*	*393*
1970s	55	*757*	*743*	55	*747*	*749*	54	*572*	*547*
1960s	49	*847*	*889*	54	*782*	*788*	56	*578*	*552*
1950s	45	*828*	*743*	45	*653*	*639*	38	*499*	*519*
1940s	36	*718*	*694*	33	*590*	*652*	34	*458*	*587*
1930s	27	*503*	*560*	26	*419*	*494*	27	*234*	*345*
1920s	21	*335*	*426*	20	*241*	*320*	25	*84*	*152*

The data for Figure 1.2 are shown below.

Table A.2 Proportion saying premarital sex is wrong, by generation cohort, 1983–2012

	1983			1987			1993			1998		
		Weighted base	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*
All	28	*1719*	*1761*	25	*1391*	*1437*	18	*1493*	*1484*	15	*1079*	*1075*
Cohort												
1970s										3	*172*	*149*
1960s				5	*268*	*250*	8	*315*	*312*	9	*231*	*240*
1950s	6	*316*	*317*	8	*261*	*267*	8	*297*	*287*	9	*193*	*177*
1940s	14	*337*	*346*	19	*278*	*290*	17	*268*	*245*	14	*167*	*155*
1930s	30	*261*	*281*	28	*209*	*230*	31	*191*	*186*	29	*149*	*145*
1920s	44	*257*	*269*	55	*209*	*226*	41	*164*	*191*	39	*96*	*122*
1910s	58	*232*	*241*	50	*121*	*128*	42	*81*	*117*			
1900s	59	*113*	*112*									

	2003			2007			2012		
		Weighted base	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*
All	14	*2148*	*2139*	11	*1042*	*1030*	11	*1099*	*1103*
Cohort									
1980s				10	*173*	*116*	13	*181*	*139*
1970s	10	*365*	*353*	5	*189*	*190*	11	*201*	*192*
1960s	8	*422*	*449*	6	*193*	*189*	5	*190*	*179*
1950s	10	*400*	*349*	8	*170*	*168*	8	*173*	*175*
1940s	12	*356*	*342*	12	*149*	*159*	10	*163*	*206*
1930s	22	*247*	*267*	25	*91*	*108*	22	*74*	*113*
1920s	42	*162*	*210*						

The data for Figure 1.3 are shown below.

Table A.3 People who want children ought to get married, by generation cohort, 1987–2012

		1987			1994			2000	
		Weighted base	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*
All	70	*1274*	*1307*	57	*1000*	*984*	53	*2991*	*2980*
Cohort									
1970s							40	*485*	*447*
1960s	49	*249*	*250*	37	*233*	*238*	36	*631*	*638*
1950s	58	*251*	*246*	47	*184*	*174*	41	*525*	*495*
1940s	72	*228*	*237*	63	*179*	*160*	65	*481*	*457*
1930s	88	*161*	*180*	82	*137*	*134*	80	*411*	*431*
1920s	95	*188*	*196*	86	*115*	*133*	88	*257*	*323*
1910s	93	*106*	*107*						

		2002			2010			2012	
		Weighted base	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*
All	51	*1984*	*1960*	42	*930*	*921*	42	*953*	*950*
Cohort									
1980s				28	*177*	*123*	28	*149*	*114*
1970s	32	*310*	*298*	31	*164*	*156*	31	*161*	*154*
1960s	36	*423*	*436*	33	*173*	*175*	34	*177*	*164*
1950s	47	*339*	*312*	32	*117*	*126*	42	*154*	*155*
1940s	63	*337*	*326*	75	*84*	*109*	62	*150*	*187*
1930s	82	*217*	*235*						
1920s	86	*154*	*184*						

The data for Figure 1.4 are shown below.

Table A.4 Views on premarital sex and homosexuality, 1983–2012

	83	**84**	**85**	**87**	**89**	**90**	**93**	**95**	**98**
% saying homosexuality is always/mostly wrong	62	67	69	69	69	68	64	55	50
% saying premarital sex always/mostly wrong	28	27	23	25	22	22	18	18	15
Weighted base	*1719*	*1645*	*1769*	*1391*	*1469*	*1353*	*1493*	*1180*	*1079*
Unweighted base	*1761*	*1675*	*1804*	*1437*	*1513*	*1397*	*1484*	*1172*	*1075*

	99	**00**	**03**	**05**	**06**	**07**	**10**	**12**
% saying homosexuality is always/mostly wrong	48	46	40	39	32	36	29	28
% saying premarital sex always/mostly wrong	14	16	14	13	13	11	11	11
Weighted base	*1056*	*3426*	*2148*	*2101*	*1089*	*1042*	*1083*	*1099*
Unweighted base	*1052*	*3426*	*2139*	*2102*	*1093*	*1030*	*1081*	*1103*

The data for Figure 1.5 are shown below.

Table A.5 Proportion saying homosexuality is wrong, by generation cohort, 1983–2012

	1983			1987			1993			1998		
		Weighted base	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*
All	62	*1719*	*1761*	74	*1391*	*1437*	64	*1493*	*1484*	50	*1079*	*1075*
Cohort												
1970s										30	*172*	*149*
1960s				62	*268*	*250*	53	*315*	*312*	40	*231*	*240*
1950s	47	*316*	*317*	62	*261*	*267*	55	*297*	*287*	47	*193*	*177*
1940s	52	*337*	*346*	68	*278*	*290*	69	*268*	*245*	52	*167*	*155*
1930s	61	*261*	*281*	84	*209*	*230*	75	*191*	*186*	71	*149*	*145*
1920s	68	*257*	*269*	91	*209*	*226*	84	*164*	*191*	72	*96*	*122*
1910s	81	*232*	*241*	93	*121*	*128*	91	*81*	*117*			
1900s	84	*113*	*112*									

	2003			2007			2012		
		Weighted base	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*
All	40	*2148*	*2139*	36	*1042*	*1030*	28	*1099*	*1103*
Cohort									
1980s				21	*173*	*116*	18	*181*	*139*
1970s	28	*365*	*353*	23	*189*	*190*	21	*201*	*192*
1960s	28	*422*	*449*	34	*193*	*189*	21	*190*	*179*
1950s	35	*400*	*349*	31	*170*	*168*	29	*173*	*175*
1940s	46	*356*	*342*	51	*149*	*159*	46	*163*	*206*
1930s	63	*247*	*267*	57	*91*	*108*	54	*74*	*113*
1920s	73	*162*	*210*						

The data for Figure 1.6 are shown below.

Table A.6 Views on whether an abortion should be allowed in different circumstances, 1983–2012

	83	84	85	86	87	89	90	94
% saying abortion should be allowed if the woman's health endangered	87	92	91	92	94	92	93	92
% saying abortion should be allowed if the woman does not wish to have child	37	29	49	44	54	49	56	54
Weighted base	*1719*	*1522*	*1769*	*1387*	*1243*	*1274*	*1163*	*1000*
Unweighted base	*1761*	*1562*	*1804*	*1416*	*1281*	*1307*	*1197*	*984*

	95	98	04	05	07	08	12
% saying abortion should be allowed if the woman's health endangered	90	92	91	91	86	90	91
% saying abortion should be allowed if the woman does not wish to have child	60	54	56	60	60	60	62
Weighted base	*1035*	*889*	*888*	*2644*	*913*	*1988*	*953*
Unweighted base	*1054*	*877*	*884*	*2645*	*906*	*2004*	*950*

The data for Figure 1.7 are shown below.

Table A.7 Proportion saying an abortion should be allowed when the woman does not wish to have the child, by generation cohort, 1983–2012

	1983			1987			1994			1998		
		Weighted base	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*
All	37	*1610*	*1650*	54	*1243*	*1281*	54	*1000*	*984*	54	*889*	*877*
Cohort												
1970s										58	*142*	*121*
1960s				63	*236*	*219*	60	*233*	*238*	58	*188*	*197*
1950s	46	*309*	*309*	56	*245*	*248*	56	*184*	*174*	58	*167*	*154*
1940s	40	*320*	*329*	53	*248*	*257*	46	*179*	*160*	45	*145*	*136*
1930s	34	*244*	*261*	48	*190*	*212*	58	*137*	*134*	47	*122*	*119*
1920s	32	*244*	*255*	52	*186*	*199*	53	*115*	*133*			
1910s	32	*210*	*219*	47	*107*	*113*						

	2004			2008			2012		
		Weighted base	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*		*Weighted base*	*Unweighted base*
All	56	*888*	*884*	60	*1988*	*2004*	62	*953*	*950*
Cohort									
1980s				65	*357*	*239*	65	*149*	*114*
1970s	66	*145*	*144*	62	*344*	*344*	65	*161*	*154*
1960s	64	*161*	*171*	62	*392*	*400*	69	*177*	*164*
1950s	59	*186*	*163*	65	*334*	*339*	65	*154*	*155*
1940s	44	*143*	*145*	53	*278*	*327*	49	*150*	*187*
1930s	45	*109*	*122*	46	*183*	*222*			

At **NatCen Social Research** we believe that social research has the power to make life better. By really understanding the complexity of people's lives and what they think about the issues that affect them, we give the public a powerful and influential role in shaping decisions and services that can make a difference to everyone. And as an independent, not for profit organisation we're able to focus our time and energy on meeting our clients' needs and delivering social research that works for society.

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