

“Gay” or “Homosexual”? The Implications of Social Category Labels for the Structure of Mass Attitudes

Introduction

In June of 2008, a strange headline about the US track team’s success at the 2008 Summer Olympics appeared on the website of a Christian news outlet, *OneNewsNow*: “Homosexual eases into 100 final at Olympic trials.” Though seemingly satirical, this article was not a joke. Rather, it was the result of *OneNewsNow*’s editorial policy not to print the word “gay,” enforced by automatically replacing every instance of “gay” in the original Associated Press article with “Homosexual.” Replacing sprinter Tyson Gay’s name was an unintended consequence of the editorial policy.

This amusing story also implies a serious question. What is the difference between “gay” and “homosexual” that led OneNewsNow to institute an editorial policy that prohibits using the word “gay”? In this paper, we show that different meanings are associated with “gay and lesbian” on one hand and “homosexual” on the other, and these differences have consequences for political attitudes. As social labels, “gay and lesbian” and “homosexual” evoke very different reactions from those who are most sensitive to distinctions between groups.

We are not the first to note that “gay and lesbian” and “homosexual” are not interchangeable. The *New York Times* style guide explains that “Gay is preferred to homosexual on social or cultural identity and political or legal issues” (Archive.glaad.org, n.d.). It goes on to say that homosexual refers to sexual activity and psychological or clinical issues, whereas gay refers to gay men and lesbians as people. The *New York Times* thus reflects a divide between social identity (i.e., “gay”) and behavior or clinical diagnosis (i.e., “homosexual”). By using the word “homosexual,” then, *OneNewsNow* resists what their news director calls a “co-option” of

the word gay as a social identity (Washingtonpost.com, n.d.), while the *New York Times*' directives to use "gay men and lesbians" to refer to individuals recognizes lesbians and gay men as a legitimate social group.

Such differences between apparent synonyms can have significant political consequences. Researchers of survey design have repeatedly addressed the problem of wording effects, which can be defined as how the wording of a question affects the opinions given in response. For instance, survey respondents are more likely to "not allow" certain behaviors than they are to "forbid" them (Rugg 1941). Zaller (1992) argues that wording effects are not simply an artifact of survey design but rather a function of how different words activate different concepts in our mind. While relatively little attention has been devoted to contrasting the political implications of "gay" and "homosexual" labels in political science, social psychologists have hypothesized that the two terms have different connotations for high authoritarians – individuals whose personality leads them to value order, conformity, and strong divisions between normative in-groups and "deviant" out-groups (Feldman, 2003; Hetherington and Weiler, 2009). In the Social Category Label (SCL) hypothesis, "gay and lesbian" and "homosexual" may be interchangeable for those low in authoritarianism, but high authoritarians associate stronger negative feelings with "homosexual" relative to "gay and lesbian." Empirical evidence in support of the SCL hypothesis, however, is mixed at best. In order to reconcile conflicting findings in the literature, we return to the theoretical basis of the SCL hypothesis and examine why and for whose attitudes we would truly expect labels such as "homosexual" to have an effect.

In doing so, we propose an important new application of the SCL hypothesis to political science. Group labels *can* affect policy preferences, for people high in authoritarianism who also belong to certain social groups. Authoritarianism itself does not give meaning to group labels. Rather, we suspect that authoritarianism provides a psychological motivation to express hostility towards those viewed as “other,” where who is actually viewed as “other” is determined by characteristics such as our social groups and our religious and moral identifications. When these factors are included in an analysis, we indeed find evidence that authoritarian attitudes about gay men and lesbians depend on the wording used. When “homosexual” is used in questions, it triggers in-group/out-group distinctions such that high authoritarians are more opposed to gay and lesbian rights when we would expect them to view “homosexuals” as an out-group, and not otherwise. When “gay and lesbian” is used in questions, these group distinctions disappear, and the effect of authoritarianism is unrelated to group identity.

In this paper, we examine the effects of wording on attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. We first conduct a historical analysis of the terms “homosexual” and “gay and lesbian,” focusing on the development of different political meanings that have been attached to these words over time. The analysis reveals social distance from lesbians and gay men and Born Again Christianity, a term which in modern US culture primarily denotes a particularly evangelical and morally conservative interpretation of Christianity, as two important aspects of how people interpret and react to “homosexual” and “gay and lesbian” (Burack 2014; Fetner 2008).¹ Next, we incorporate these historical insights into an empirical test of the SCL Hypothesis. Consistent with historical and theoretical expectations, a split-ballot experiment from the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES) demonstrates that authoritarianism increases hostility towards

“homosexuals,” but only when an individual's social in-groups are defined such that they are more likely to view “homosexuals” as an out-group. This interaction disappears when the term “gay and lesbian” is used. Finally, we discuss the implications of this work for research on authoritarianism, public opinion, and politics in general.

Homosexual and Gay and Lesbian as Political Terms

The perpetually-changing nature of the words used to describe identities and groups—and associated social movements and political organizations—reveals the ways in which the terms used to reference and unify groups are produced through politics, and in turn reflect shifting political contexts. For example, Murib (2015) shows how the terms used to index gender identity have shifted over time, from “transvestite” to “transsexual” being used by psychiatrists and medical professionals to “transgender” being favored by people interested in mobilizing a unique political agenda that emphasizes the socially constructed nature of gender identity and political agency.

“Homosexual,” “lesbian,” and “gay” have undergone similar changes over time. Historians of sexuality have shown, for example, how the term “homosexual” itself was transformed from a way to describe perceived aberrations in behavior that required medical and state intervention to a clinical diagnosis by doctors in the U.S. during the 1940s (D’Emilio, 1983). This shift in “homosexual” from connotations with pathology and state-sanctioned punishment to a set of behaviors that inhered within individuals created the possibility for men and women to *privately* claim the medical term, “homosexual,” as a way to describe their sexuality (Canaday, 2009; D’Emilio, 1983).

No sooner had “homosexual” been settled as the preferred label for the burgeoning social group did the terms change once again. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, and against the backdrop of radical politics, some gay and lesbian-identified activists sought ways to publicly claim their identities not only as constitutive of their sense of self outside of medical discourse (Boyd, 2003; D’Emilio, 1983; Murib, 2015). Reflecting these desires, the first organization formed to represent these young activists was named the Gay Liberation Front, and “gay” subsequently became the way to identify not only with same-sex sexuality, but also with a political orientation that was public, proud, and emphatically *inclusive* of all sexual expression for those who chose to self-identify as “gay”.

Resulting Politics

The struggles to attach different meanings to “gay” as an inclusive and positive identification on one hand, and “homosexual” as clinical and deviant on the other, shows how political actors are able to use varying terms to mobilize their particular constituencies to action.

The emphasis on “coming out,” for instance, illustrates how allies and self-identified gay and lesbian people worked to attach positive associations with gay identity. Coming out describes the process through which people publicly self-identify as lesbian or gay to family, friends, and co-workers (Armstrong, 2002; D’Emilio, 1983). One activist during the 1970s explained that coming out, “had the capacity to be transformative because it turned personal action into political statement” (*The Come Out! Reader*, 2012, p. 17). Reflecting the activist ethos of the late 1960s and early 1970s, political leaders and activists accompanied their calls for people to come out with the assertion that “gay is good,” which was an adaptation of the Black Panther’s announcement that “Black is beautiful” (Kissack, 1995). Coming out as gay, in other

words, was a way to affect political change with the added benefit of challenging the self-imposed isolation that stemmed from shame previously associated with same-sex desire. Using “gay” thus became the predominant way to signal in-group status and acceptance. The assertion that gay identity was a source of pride, and not shame, lent some momentum to lesbian and gay political and social gains, and also drew the attention of opponents, specifically the Religious Right.

Born Again Christians developed “gay conversion therapies” as a way to sever the link between identity and sexuality that is so central to gay identity (Burack, 2014). The principle contention of these proposed treatment programs was that same-sex attraction and relationships were *behaviors* that could be avoided through proper medical attention, and not social or political *identities* that were salient for individuals. In line with this stated goal, the advocates for these therapies elevated “homosexual” as the main way to refer to all same-sex sexuality in order to underscore connotations with medical and behavioral aberration (Burack, 2014; Fetner 2008). In other words, the use of “homosexual” and the persistent denial of “gay” identity by these groups sought to sever the link between self-recognition and identification that was so passionately advocated for by Gay Liberationists. Instead, the use of “homosexual,” specifically by conservatives and Born Again Christians, aimed to return same-sex sexuality to realm of pathology and, by association, stigmatized behaviors. The emphasis on “homosexual” contra “gay” became a common feature of evangelical and conservative politics that continues to this day, as demonstrated by the OneNewsNow’s use of “homosexual” in reference to Tyson Gay. “Homosexual” thus developed as a way for Born Again Christians to signal and connote an out-

group. In the next section, we show how these connotations shape attitudes about policies concerning gay men and lesbians.

Theory

Question Wording Effects

Survey researchers have been cognizant of the effects of question wording for some time, underscoring that the words we use to ask questions can impact the answers that we receive. Political scientists initially regarded these effects as methodological artifacts to be documented and controlled for in research. As mentioned above, Rugg (1941) shows that people react much more favorably to “not allowing” certain actions rather than “forbidding” them. Yet Rugg reaches no substantive conclusions about why this discrepancy occurs. If it were true that some words are viewed more negatively by all people, we might be able to settle for merely controlling for wording differences. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that wording differences can also result in meaningful opinion differences, either in the construction of those opinions or in the differences between groups. Zaller (1992) argues that survey responses depend on what a question brings to mind. Thus, the differing connotations of apparent synonyms is vital to understanding public opinion and especially differences of opinion between groups. This is demonstrated by Schuldt et al.’s (2011) research on “climate change” and “global warming”. “Global warming” is connected to more incredulity than its scientific synonym “climate change,” and Schuldt et al. accordingly find more belief in “climate change” than “global warming.” However, this is only true among Republicans, who are exposed to rhetoric from trusted elites who tend to deride global warming while not mentioning climate change. Meanwhile, climate change and global warming appear to be equivalent in the minds of Democrats. This wording

difference cannot be controlled away. In survey research terms, the correlation is not form-resistant because the difference between Republicans and Democrats depends on the wording used. In addition, it has serious political consequences: environmentally-conscious politicians who wish to appeal to Republicans would be best advised to use the phrase “climate change” in their speeches.

We contend that a similar effect should exist with “gay and lesbian” and “homosexual.” Some research already shows that questions involving “homosexuals” tend to receive a more negative response than questions about “gays and lesbians” (Hechtkopf, 2010). This research, however, is preliminary and assumes a form-resistant correlation – i.e. that all individuals will react more negatively to the word “homosexual.” Introducing much-needed nuance through her examination of the SCL hypothesis, Rios (2013) suggests that the perceived difference between “homosexual” and “gay and lesbian” should be strongest among high authoritarians, those individuals whose personality leads them to be the most attentive to those *social category labels* which mark people as in-group members or out-group members. Again because of the historical context of these terms outlined in the above section, the word “homosexual” has evolved into an association with people who are marked as “other” by Born Again Christians, while “gays and lesbians” are more likely to be considered friends, relatives, and co-workers. Thus, we might expect authoritarians to be more hostile to the out-group-coded “homosexuals” than toward the relatively neutrally-coded “gays and lesbians.” Rios (2013) establishes this relationship using online convenience samples, finding that authoritarianism predicts prejudice against “homosexuals,” but not against “gays and lesbians.” Critically, however, an extensive replication by Crawford et al. (2016) finds no such effect. Using data from the 2012 ANES, replication

materials from Rios (2013), and multiple original data collections, Crawford et al. find no consistent evidence of an interaction between these labels and authoritarianism, using multiple measures of authoritarianism and multiple outcomes relating to prejudice toward gay men and lesbians. Across 23 interactions tested, only two results supported the SCL hypothesis that high authoritarians should be more hostile toward “homosexuals” than “gays and lesbians.”

We build on this debate by contending that the effect of authoritarianism on attitudes toward LGB individuals is more complex than previously considered. In the first place, authoritarianism does not automatically lead to the exclusion of sexual minorities. Hetherington and Weiler (2009) describe those who are highly authoritarian as having a stronger need for order than others. Because of this need for order, conformity is preferred over ambiguity of any type. Threats to that conformity lead authoritarians to divide the world into in-groups and out-groups. As a way to protect social conventions and maintain social conformity, authoritarians keep out-groups at a distance, protecting themselves from social deviants (Feldman, 2003).² Those who are less authoritarian put more emphasis on autonomy and are more comfortable with ambiguity such as social or political groups that deviate from social conventions. These social conventions, however, will differ between individual experiences and social networks. As shown by our historical analysis, “homosexual” is especially used to differentiate in-groups and out-groups *in specific social contexts*. Rather than hypothesize that all authoritarians will react to the word “homosexual” in the same way, we expect that this effect will depend on religion (i.e. connection to Born Again Christianity) and social networks (i.e. whether or not a person knows someone who identifies as gay or lesbian).

Born Again Christianity and social distance both emerge organically as moderators from our historical analysis of these terms. As previously discussed, these Christian churches have used the word “homosexual” as a way to combat the growing cultural acceptance of “gay and lesbian” and mark gay men and lesbians as “not like us.” Thus, authoritarians who are from this particular tradition of Christianity should be more sensitive to the use of “homosexual” as a cue for “out-group.” Meanwhile, those authoritarians who do not have gay men or lesbians in their social circles should also be especially sensitive to the difference between “homosexual” and “gay and lesbian,” since they have not been socialized by their acquaintances to connect the otherwise clinical term “homosexual” with the real people whom they might encounter in their day-to-day life.³ While “homosexual” is a loaded term which primes thoughts of in-groups and out-groups, certain people (such as Born Again Christians) have been socialized to place “homosexuals” as a clear out-group. On the other hand, the priming of in-groups and out-groups may remind some people (such as those with gay or lesbian acquaintances) that so-called “homosexuals” are actually part of their in-group. Thus, we cannot simply assert that terms which cue group-related thoughts will also increase authoritarian opposition toward those groups. Rather, the effect of these terms will depend on a given individual’s position in relation to the group.

To summarize our theory, we believe that high authoritarians will react more negatively to “homosexual” policy than “gay and lesbian” policy. However, this should only be true for people whose cultural context leads them to view “homosexual” as especially outside their in-group. That is, high authoritarians who are Born Again Christians or who do not know any gay men or lesbians should react more negatively to “homosexual” policy than “gay and lesbian”

policy. However, there should be no such negative wording effect for high authoritarians who are not Born Again Christians or who do have gay men or lesbians in their social circle. More formally, we first test the hypothesis that there is an interaction between authoritarianism, conservative Christianity, and question wording (hypothesis 1). We then test the hypothesis that there is an interaction between authoritarianism, social distance from lesbians and gay men, and question wording (hypothesis 2).

Quantitative Analysis⁴

In order to test these hypotheses, it is necessary to directly compare questions which use “homosexual” against questions which use “gay and lesbian.” While many surveys have replaced “homosexual” with “gay and lesbian” over time, comparing questions from different years is not especially useful. Public opinion regarding same-sex relationships has changed rapidly, and it would be difficult if not impossible to disentangle this from the effect of wording. Fortunately, a direct cross-sectional comparison is available in a 2012 ANES split ballot experiment conducted as part of the ANES time-series—as previously used by Crawford et al. (2016) to test the SCL hypothesis that wording would strengthen or weaken the effect of authoritarianism. In the survey, all individuals were presented with two questions regarding policies affecting lesbians and gay men. For half of participants these questions were about “homosexual” policy, while the other half were presented with identical questions about “gay and lesbian” policy. By comparing participant responses to these questions, it is possible to see if the wording differences actually affect attitudes. Thus, in this section, we use this split ballot experiment to directly test our hypotheses.

Participants

The 2012 ANES time-series study had 5,914 respondents, sampled using both face-to-face interviews and an internet survey of American eligible voters.^{5 6}

Measures

Outcome Variable. We measure attitudes toward “homosexuals” and “gays and lesbians” using an index of two survey questions. The first asks about job discrimination protection for gay men and lesbians, and the other asks about allowing gay men and lesbians to serve in the military. For half of respondents (N = 2, 972) both of these questions refer to “homosexuals,” while the other half of respondents (N = 2,854) received questions about “gays and lesbians.” The specific question wording may be found in the appendix.

There are many other policies implicating gay men and lesbians which could have been used in this analysis. We focus on job discrimination and military service for two reasons. Pragmatically, these are the only two issues which have been asked using the “homosexual/gays and lesbians” split ballot on the ANES. From a more conceptual standpoint, these issues are also ideal for measuring the effects of labels. Other issues such as “gay marriage” are consistently associated with a particular label, and it seems likely that even references to “homosexual marriage” would be translated into “gay marriage” in the mind of the respondent. However, there are no equivalent catchphrases for job discrimination or military service. The most recognized reference to gay men and lesbians in the military (Don’t Ask Don’t Tell) does not include either “gay” or “homosexual.” Finally, by using these items with the following operationalization we are able to replicate Crawford et al.’s (2016) outcome variable.

Both of the policy questions have branched response structures assessing attitude strength which ultimately result in a 4-point ordinal measure ranging from 1 (strongly in favor) to 4

(strongly opposed). We then averaged the responses to these two items, creating 7-point indices for homosexual policy opposition and for gay and lesbian policy opposition, recoded to range from 0 to 1. While these two items measure different policy attitudes, they nevertheless form a moderately reliable index of generalized attitudes toward policies affecting gay men and lesbians, and both the “homosexual” and “gay and lesbian” scales are equally reliable ($\alpha=.64$ and $\alpha=.62$, respectively). In addition, combining these items should curtail measurement errors that might be present in any one item (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder, 2008). As our outcome variable can be treated as an interval-level measure, we use OLS regression in the analyses that follow.

Explanatory Variables. Authoritarianism is measured with a set of questions about child-rearing values. These four questions ask participants to choose between values children should have, such as independence versus respect for elders, or obedience versus self-reliance. Half of these values are related more to conformity and respect for authority, while the opposing set of values are related more to independent thinking. Stenner (2005) uses these items to create a measure of authoritarianism values that is uncontaminated by political views. This is especially important in this case since measures of Right-Wing Authoritarianism often contain questions about *both* “gays and lesbians” and “homosexuals,” which would essentially result in measuring our outcome variable within this important explanatory variable (Altemeyer, 2006). We coded each child-rearing item so that the less-authoritarian value was 0 and the more authoritarian value was 1. We then averaged the items, creating a scale running from low to high authoritarianism, coded from 0 to 1.7

Born Again Christianity is measured using the proxy of Born Again identity. Respondents were asked whether they identified as Born Again or had a personal Born Again conversion experience. The item is coded 0 if the respondent is either a non-Born-Again Christian or a non-Christian, and 1 if the respondent identified themselves as Born Again. Social distance is measured simply as whether or not the respondent knows someone who is lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB). This item was coded 0 if the respondent knows someone who is LGB, and 1 if they do not.

Controls. In order to ensure that the key explanatory variables are not serving as proxies for other important determinants of attitudes about policies affecting lesbians and gay men, we include several controls for variables which are known to influence these policy attitudes: age, income, education, race (0 = non-Black, 1 = Black), gender (0 = male, 1 = female), ideology (higher indicates more conservative), party ID (higher indicates more Republican). In addition, we also control for veteran status (0 = non-veteran, 1 = veteran) since a component of the outcome variable is attitudes about lesbians and gay men serving openly in the military. All variables except for age are coded from 0 to 1. Because we are focused on the presentation of “homosexuals” as an out-group, our analysis was limited to those who did not identify themselves as LGB. When all controls are included, we analyze 2,137 respondents in the “homosexual” condition and 2,058 in the “gay and lesbian” condition.

Results

First, it is worth highlighting that wording alone does not seem to exert any influence on policy attitudes—as can be seen in the appendix, wording is not a significant predictor of policy attitudes, although authoritarianism, Born Again Christian identity, and social distance from

LGB individuals all increase opposition toward policies benefiting gay men and lesbians. (Table A.4, Model 1). Similarly, the interaction of authoritarianism and question wording does not have a significant effect on policy attitudes (Table A.4, Model 2). Rather, authoritarianism increases opposition toward policies benefiting gay men and lesbians, whether or not these individuals are referred to as “homosexual” or “gay and lesbian.” Like Crawford et al. (2016), we do not find evidence in the ANES data for the simplest form of the SCL hypothesis.

However, both of these effects are anticipated by our theory—only when people are psychologically motivated to resent difference and culturally primed to see it do we expect a difference between the “homosexual” and “gay and lesbian” wordings. We turn, then, to other tests of our main hypotheses.

We test Hypothesis 1 in two ways. First, the most rigorous approach, both conceptually and empirically, is to regress our same-sex policy outcome variable on the interaction between (1) whether or not respondents received the “homosexual” or “gay and lesbian” treatment (2) their scores on the authoritarianism scale, and (3) their Born Again Christian identity. These results are summarized in section 1 in Table 1, and full results can be found in the Appendix.

Second, while we prefer to estimate these results using three-way interactive models, we also recognize that doing so introduces several potentially collinear terms into the model. Multicollinearity may bias the standard error associated with the three-way interaction term, increasing the likelihood that we commit Type II error. Consequently, in addition to testing whether or not this is the case, we re-estimate the results using two two-way interaction models (interacting authoritarianism with Born Again Christian identity). These can be found in sections 2-3 of Table 1.

Both sets of models offer strong support for Hypothesis 1. The three-way interactive test produced a positive and statistically significant interaction ($B = 0.19, p < 0.05$), indicating that increased levels of authoritarianism are associated with increased opposition toward same-sex policy for Born Again individuals in the “homosexual” condition, compared to Born Again individuals in the “gay and lesbian” condition. The two-way interactive test yielded very similar results, producing a positive and statistically significant interaction between authoritarianism and Born-Again Christian identity only in the “homosexual” condition ($B = 0.08, p < 0.05$).

Table 1

To better understand the substantive effects of the question wording treatments, Figure 1 plots predicted levels of opposition to same-sex policy across levels of authoritarianism for Born Again Christians, compared to all other respondents. We calculate these predictions based on the results from the two-way interactive models, because formal tests reveal problematic levels of collinearity (i.e., a Variance Inflation Factor or VIF exceeding 10; see Menard 1995) in the three-way interactive model ($VIF = 19.57$). While the results were consistent across estimation strategies, this nevertheless suggests that the standard error surrounding the three-way interactive parameter, and its resulting confidence intervals, may be inflated.

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, Figure 1 shows that when the word “homosexual” is used in policy questions, out-group distinctions appear to be quite influential for highly-authoritarian, Born Again individuals. The predictions suggest that Born Again individuals asked about “homosexual” policies increase their opposition by 21% moving from low to high levels of authoritarianism. In contrast, non-Born Again individuals in the “homosexual” condition increases their opposition to same-sex policy by only 8%. Also, consistent with Hypothesis 1, we

do not find a similar effect in the “gay and lesbian” condition. High authoritarians have more negative same-sex policy attitudes than do low authoritarians, regardless of their religious identity.

Figure 1

We repeat this same sequence of analyses in order to test Hypothesis 2 about Born Again Identity. The results, summarized in Table 2, were generally supportive of Hypothesis 2.

First, the three-way interaction between social closeness, authoritarianism, and question wording (section 1 of Table 2) was correctly signed ($B = 0.08$), but fell short of attaining conventional levels of significance ($p > 0.10$). However, using two-way interactive models (sections 2-3 of Table 2), we do find a positive and statistically significant two-way interaction between authoritarianism and social distance in the “homosexual policy” condition ($B = 0.09$, $p = 0.05$). As anticipated, we do not find the same effect in the “gay and lesbian” condition.

The difference in statistical significance across models is not entirely surprising, given the previous presence of multi-collinearity in Table 1. The standard error associated with the three-way interaction term in Table 2 ($SE = 0.07$) was nearly double the size of that associated with the two-way term in the “homosexual” condition ($SE = 0.04$). Formal variance inflation tests reveal that the three-way term produced a VIF of 18.8, suggesting that standard error inflation was likely caused by the introduction of collinear terms into the model.

Figure 2

Figure 2 again displays support for our expectations. For individuals without LGB acquaintances, opposition to same-sex policies increase by 16%, moving from low to high levels of authoritarianism. In contrast, those who do have LGB acquaintances only increase their

opposition to same-sex policy by about 6%, moving from low to high levels of authoritarianism. Also consistent with Hypothesis 2, we do not find a similar effect in the “gay and lesbian” condition. High authoritarians have more negative same-sex policy attitudes than do low authoritarians, irrespective of their social distance from LGB individuals.

Before concluding, three important points bear mentioning. First, because we test these expectations in a single study, some might be concerned that the results occurred by chance, or are unique to a specific year. Consequently, we provide supplementary tests of these analyses using several waves of the General Social Survey (GSS) in Appendix B. While the GSS did not feature a split-ballot question wording experiment, it *did* include measures of opposition to social rights for “homosexuals,” as well as measures of authoritarianism, Born Again identity, and social distance from LGB individuals. As we describe in detail in Appendix B, we again find that authoritarianism interacts with Born Again identity and social distance from LGB individuals to produce greater opposition to same-sex policy issues.

Second, it is not our intention to argue that authoritarianism and Born Again identity or social distance never interact when questions are asked about “gay and lesbian” respondents, but rather that this effect is larger and substantively more important when the word “homosexual” triggers thoughts of in-groups and out-groups. In fact, we do find substantively small but significant interactions of authoritarianism with Born Again identity and social distance on responses to the “gay and lesbian” feeling thermometer in the 2012 ANES, as can be seen in Table A.5 of the appendix. Respondents who were high in authoritarianism were significantly cooler toward “gay men and lesbians” if they identified as Born Again or did not report knowing any LGB individuals. We suspect, but are unable to test, that this interaction would have been

significantly stronger if respondents were asked about their feelings toward “homosexuals.” However, future research may find that the effect of wording is limited to policy attitudes, rather than explicit attitudes about LGB individuals.

Finally, it is worthwhile to note that the interactive effects reported here are affecting large portions of the American population. In the ANES representative-weighted sample, about 55% of non-LGB respondents score .75 or above on the 0-1 authoritarianism scale, i.e. where we see the largest differences between groups in the “homosexual” condition. About 43% of the sample know someone who is LGB, and 21% of the sample both know someone who is LGB and score .75 or above on authoritarianism. Born Again Christians, meanwhile, make up 33% of the sample, with 23% of the sample both identifying as Born Again and scoring .75 or above on authoritarianism. While our effects are highly conditional, the conditions appear to be common.

Summary

Using the highest standard for a wording effect study—a split ballot design—we find evidence for an important modification of the SCL hypothesis. High authoritarians do appear to be more sensitive to the word “homosexual,” but it does *not* trigger uniform opposition. Rather, it appears to increase sensitivity to group distinctions, such that high authoritarians who have cultural experiences that predispose them to view gay men and lesbians as “other” become more opposed to policies benefiting those individuals, while high authoritarians who lack those experiences or who are closer to gay men and lesbians are no more opposed to these policies than low authoritarians. The phrase “gay and lesbian,” meanwhile, has no such divisive effect on attitudes. This finding is corroborated by a conceptual replication showing that over several years of the GSS, authoritarianism has interacted with Born Again identity and social distance from

gay men and lesbians to determine people's attitudes about "homosexuals." Once again, those authoritarians with group identities or social experiences that predispose them to view "homosexuals" as the out-group are more hostile than authoritarians who do not share those identities or experiences.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings described in the previous section have several implications. First, we contribute to the ongoing discussion of the SCL hypothesis by both providing evidence that labels matter more to high authoritarians and by suggesting that the effect of authoritarianism is more complex than previously suggested. While we replicate Crawford et al. (2016) and find no moderating effect of wording on the relationship between authoritarianism and attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, we do find that wording matters when group identity is also taken into account. It is thus premature to conclude that the difference between "homosexual" and "gay and lesbian" is inconsequential to the study of authoritarianism. However, we also show that it is too simplistic to suggest that all authoritarians should react to social category labels in the same way.

Second, these findings focus our attention on how *context* interacts with authoritarianism. If both group identity and labels matter for authoritarianism in this case, they presumably will also matter for other labels as well. Further research might look into the interaction of authoritarianism with other social category labels involving race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or any other group descriptions. As terminology and attitudes evolve, the effects of labels may also change. Our use of data from 1988 to 2012 limits our ability to address whether the difference between "gay and lesbian" and "homosexual" persists in 2017; future research should replicate and extend this work. It is important to note, however, that the Trump administration is able to

reconcile support for the “LGBT community” with policies that prioritize “the union of one man and one woman.” This would seem to indicate that some duality of language is still in play.

Finally, this research allows us to provide recommendations for both research methods and practical application. Contestation over the appropriate terminology for gay men and lesbians has led to a patchwork of research that alternatively uses the terms “homosexual” and “gay and lesbian” when referring to gay men and lesbians in surveys. While we cannot ultimately conclude which terminology is “better,” we do show that different effects may be obtained depending on the wording. Rather than simply using “homosexual” or other terminology based on personal preference, future research should consider which phrases are used more often in their target population or when talking about their particular research subject, and use the terminology which best reflects this. As “gay and lesbian” becomes more common in colloquial discourse to the exclusion of “homosexual,” it seems likely that most research projects should focus on “gay and lesbian” as the term their own participants use when they think or speak about issues impacting gay men and lesbians. Even when other terms are preferred, however, consistency is key. When writing about their research, scholars should mirror the terminology used in their questions in order to most clearly convey their results to the reader. For those who seek to influence opinion, the word “homosexual” provides an interestingly double-edged sword. Because “homosexual” appears to remind people of in-group/out-group divisions, it can both increase and decrease authoritarian opposition to policies benefiting gay men and lesbians. “Gay and lesbian” meanwhile appears to be a more neutral term, neither increasing nor decreasing the effect of authoritarianism. As consumers and creators of political information, it will only benefit us to be more aware of the effects which wording can have on our attitudes—

especially when over half the population may potentially be swayed by the choice between
“synonyms.”

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Endnotes

¹ Here we follow the literature on the rise of the Christian Right in U.S. Politics and use “Born Again Christians” as an umbrella term for Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christians (see Burack 2014, Fetner 2008). This mirrors our measurement in the analysis section, when we test the interaction between wording, authoritarianism, and specific Christian identity; respondents were asked to identify as Born Again or as having had a Born Again experience

² Although authoritarians are especially pronounced in their avoidance of out-groups, this behavior is not limited to authoritarians. Motyl et al. (2014) finds that both liberals and conservatives distance themselves from political out-groups, and Crawford, Mallinas, and Furman (2015) find that people both high and low Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) show antipathy toward different out-groups, depending on their levels of RWA and SDO. However, authoritarians by definition attach more importance to group hierarchy and maintaining divisions between the normative in-group and out-group. To the extent that “homosexuals” are seen as violating traditional norms and weakening group hierarchies which place heteronormative ideals at the top, we feel comfortable asserting that high authoritarians will be more sensitive to the “homosexual” label.

³ The “Contact Hypothesis” advances the argument that negative attitudes towards gay men and lesbians can be altered by becoming acquainted with openly-identified gay men and lesbians, see Pettigrew and Tropp (2006).

⁴ All data used is publicly available through the American National Election Studies or the General Social Survey. Models were conducted using Stata, and the authors will provide an analysis do-file to replicate these models upon request.

5 We tested for mode effects of completing the survey online rather than with an in-person interviewer, and found no evidence that survey mode influenced our results either when included as a control or when interacted with authoritarianism and Born Again identity or social distance. See Tables A.6 and A.7 in the appendix for interactive results.

6 In order to account for sampling design, the ANES provides survey weights which we have used throughout these analyses—in this case, the “weight_full” variable.

7 We are aware of the concerns raised by Pérez and Hetherington (2014) about the use of child-rearing questions to measure authoritarianism among non-white respondents. For this reason, we estimate three sets of models for our main ANES analyses. The analyses included in the main text include all respondents, with a control for Black respondents. Tables A.8 and A.9 in the appendix re-estimate the ANES models by either limiting the analysis to whites or by excluding Black respondents. Both of these specifications substantively replicate the analyses presented in the main text, as do additional re-analyses of the GSS results in Appendix B.