

A liberalisation in attitudes?

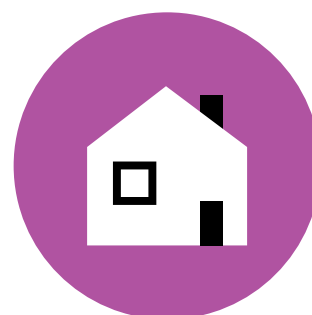
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A liberalisation in attitudes?

This chapter examines the substantial liberalisation in moral attitudes that has taken place over the past four decades, focusing on family formation, sexual relationships, and abortion. How universal has this process been and what factors are driving it – changes in the public’s demographic make-up, changes in how society deals with these issues in terms of legislation and popular discussion, or changes in our behaviour? What do long-term trends to date suggest will happen in the future and how might they help us to understand more recent data on attitudes to people who are transgender?



Greater acceptance of non-traditional family forms and sexual relationships

- While we are much more accepting of non-traditional family forms and sexual relationships than we were four decades ago, there is no clear consensus regarding the acceptability of various family forms when children are involved.
- 81% think it is all right for a couple to live together without being married, up from 64% in 1994.
- 67% think a sexual relationship between two people of the same sex is never wrong, compared with 17% in 1983.
- 45% disagree that people who want children ought to get married (24% agree) and 50% agree one parent can bring up a child as well as two (31% disagree).

Support for abortion has increased but depends on context

- People are more likely to think an abortion should be allowed in a range of circumstances compared with four decades ago, although there is less universal support when there is no health risk involved.
- Support for an abortion being allowed in circumstances when the woman decides on her own that she does not want to have a child has risen from 37% in 1983 to 76% now.
- Most people think abortion should be allowed when the woman's health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy (95%) or when there is a strong chance of the baby having a serious health condition (89%); 72% express this view when the couple cannot afford any more children and 68% when the woman does not wish to marry the man.

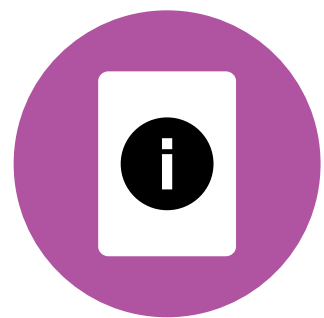
Decline in liberal views regarding people who are transgender

- Attitudes towards people who are transgender have become markedly less liberal over the past three years.
- 64% describe themselves as not prejudiced at all against people who are transgender, a decline of 18 percentage points since 2019 (82%).
- Just 30% think someone should be able to have the sex on their birth certificate altered if they want, down from 53% in 2019.
- While women, younger people, the more educated and less religious express more liberal views towards people who are transgender, these views have declined across all demographic groups.

Introduction

The last four decades have seen a dramatic liberalisation in attitudes to a wide range of social and moral issues, as documented in previous British Social Attitudes (BSA) reports and elsewhere (see, for instance Albakri et al, 2019; Swales and Attar Taylor, 2017; Park and Rhead, 2013). In this chapter, we take a long-term view to explore the evolution in attitudes to three specific moral issues, which we have asked about at regular intervals since the 1980s – namely, family formation, sexual relationships and abortion. By comparing trends in attitudes within, and between, these three areas, we will consider how accurate and universal the characterisation of a ‘liberalisation of moral attitudes’ is in practice – or whether we have simply become more liberal on certain issues, whilst maintaining the status quo or becoming less liberal on others.

A number of developments have been identified to explain the long-term liberalisation in moral attitudes in Britain: changes in the prevalence of certain characteristics associated with more or less liberal views (typically levels of education and religiosity); changes in how wider society deals with specific moral issues (in terms of policy, legislation, and popular discussion and debate); and changes in individual behaviour (that might make it more likely that a person would have direct experience of a particular moral issue). By exploring the nature and timing of shifts in attitudes to each moral issue, the universality of these shifts across society and the evolving views of different generations, we will seek to assess which of these broad sets of factors best explains the liberalisation of attitudes that has occurred in each instance, and whether any broad conclusions can be drawn regarding the process of liberalisation in Britain, or whether change needs to be understood in relation to the nuances of each individual issue.



Next, we will turn to examine more recent data, collected over the past six years, on a ‘moral issue’ which has received increasing attention – people who are transgender – and consider how we might interpret this, in the context of what we have learnt from our analysis and synthesis of the longer-term data on moral attitudes across a range of areas.

In addition to assessing how far trends in relation to each of these four issues may reflect a general liberalisation in moral attitudes, we will consider the relationships between attitudes in these different areas to establish how far views on the four different moral issues are associated with each other. It is intended that this analysis will add further weight to our assessment of the extent to which attitudinal change in relation to the four moral issues has been issue-specific, or reflects a more general process of liberalisation.

By drawing together our learning regarding the liberalisation of moral attitudes in Britain, and the validity of this concept, we will seek to conclude the chapter by considering what this might mean for the future evolution of moral attitudes in Britain.

The process of liberalisation

We begin by rehearsing, at a theoretical level, the different reasons why attitudes to moral issues in Britain may have become more liberal over the past four decades. Broadly speaking, there are three different sets of developments which tend to be attributed with driving attitudinal change in this area – changes in the demographic make-up of the British public, changes at the societal level in relation to the issues of interest, and behavioural change at the individual level.

The demographic make-up of the British population in 2022 differs significantly from that observed in the early 1980s, as tracked by data from the Census, collected at 10-yearly intervals. In particular, Britain's population is now older, more ethnically diverse, more educated and less religious than it was four decades ago. The latter two changes, in particular, have frequently been identified in the literature as drivers of the liberalisation in moral attitudes which we have witnessed over the same period. Practicing, or affiliating with, a religious faith tends to be associated with more conservative moral attitudes, as many religions condemn certain non-traditional practices in relation to relationships and parenthood, such as homosexuality, cohabitation and abortion. In 1983, 31% of people said that they did not belong to a particular religion, a figure that now stands at 50%. Therefore, we can logically expect religious ideologies to be impacting on the moral views of a somewhat smaller proportion of the population, than they were four decades ago.



Over the same period, there has been a vast expansion in non-compulsory education, with a dramatic rise in the number of young people attending higher education in particular. This is significant because of the relationship that exists between graduate-level education and liberal values across a range of areas – a relationship that has been attributed to various factors, 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). In 1985, when the BSA survey began measuring respondents’ levels of education, 7% had a qualification at degree level or higher, while 45% had no educational qualifications at all; by 2019, these figures had gone some way towards reversing, with 27% having a degree-level qualification and 18% having no qualifications¹. Given that the receipt of a higher education is associated with the development of more liberal attitudes, we would now logically expect this relationship to be impacting on the moral attitudes of a far greater proportion of the public, than was the case four decades ago.

However, attitudes to specific moral issues have also been shown to be associated with changes in how wider society deals with them – how frequently and in what terms they are discussed and debated, and what legislation and structures are proposed and enacted to allow (or disallow) and to regulate them. Such relationships between societal practice and attitudes in relation to particular moral issues are not necessarily one-directional; it has been argued that legislation frequently reflects shifts in social attitudes (with policymakers and politicians introducing changes that they know will receive public support), rather than these changes necessarily subsequently driving shifts in attitudes. In this chapter we will consider, for example, how the legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2013 and the introduction of civil partnerships for heterosexual couples in 2019 may have influenced attitudes to homosexual relationships and heterosexual marriage specifically. Such legal and structural changes are frequently accompanied or preceded by considerable public discussion and debate – which also has the potential to influence people’s views. For instance, we will examine how public concern about the HIV-AIDS crisis in the 1980s and the subsequent introduction of Section 28 in 1988, and, more recently, intense debate around proposed reform to the 2004 Gender Recognition Act, may have influenced attitudes to homosexual relationships and to people who are transgender respectively.

¹ Due to the shift to an online mode of data collection in 2020, the standard BSA question on education was subsequently asked in a different format, meaning that data obtained is not comparable with that which was collected in 2019 and previously.

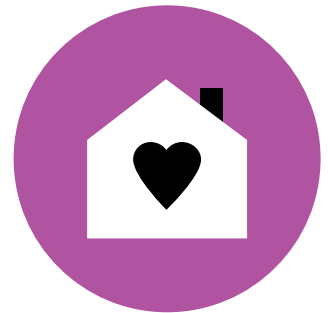
Finally, it has been argued that changes in individual behaviour can also drive changes in attitudes to moral issues. There is a wealth of research demonstrating that people are more accepting of groups or behaviours which they have encountered directly in their own lives or indirectly in the lives of their peers (Abrahms, 2010). Thus, we will investigate how, for instance, the rise in cohabitation and decline in marriage among heterosexual couples, including parents, and the rise in single parenthood, may have influenced attitudes to these non-traditional family forms. Inevitably, individual behaviour itself is influenced by what is permitted by legal and societal structures and is not evenly distributed across society, meaning that a person's chance of knowing someone who is homosexual, transgender, or has had an abortion, for instance, might vary on the basis of their own demographic characteristics – a factor we will need to take into account when analysing the data.

When trying to understand processes of attitudinal change, such as a liberalisation in moral attitudes, researchers typically undertake cohort analysis, to identify if changes are caused by a 'generational' effect (with, in this instance, more conservative generations dying off and being replaced by more liberal ones), an age effect (with all generations' views shifting in a consistent direction as they age) or a period (cohort) effect (with a change at the societal level affecting the views of all generations at the same time) (for further information, see the Technical Details chapter). The three types of change described above, which have been characterised as driving the liberalisation in attitudes in Britain, can, to some degree, be mapped back to these types of effects – although the ways in which they materialise in practice are not always straight-forward. So, for example, if attitudes have primarily become more liberal because less educated, more religious generations have been replaced by more educated and less religious ones, then we would expect to primarily see the liberalisation in views being driven by generational replacement. If views have primarily shifted in response to changes at the societal level, such as the HIV-AIDS crisis or debate regarding reform of the Gender Recognition Act, we would anticipate the views of all groups shifting at the same time – bearing in mind that certain groups might be more engaged with or affected by such societal developments than others.

Finally, if the liberalisation of moral attitudes has primarily been driven by shifts in individual behaviour (such as fewer people marrying and more people bringing up children on their own), we would expect views to change gradually among all groups (so appearing as a long-term period effect) but to be most concentrated among those sections of society most exposed to these shifts in behaviour. In many instances, this is likely to be those in their 20s and 30s, as they and their peers enter the stages of developing relationships, family formation and parenthood. It is these complex relationships which we seek to untangle for the three moral issues of interest, in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

Family formation

We begin by examining how attitudes to family formation have changed over the past four decades. The make-up and legal status of families in Britain has evolved substantially over this period, with the range of common family forms becoming increasingly diverse. While the default position for much of the 20th century was for a couple to marry before living together and having children, marriage has become increasingly less popular, with marriage rates for opposite-sex couples having fallen to the lowest on record since 1862; in 2019, for men, there were 18.6 marriages per 1,000 unmarried men; for women, there were 17.2 marriages per 1,000 unmarried women (Office for National Statistics, 2022b)². In the previous 30 years, since 1989, the number of marriages per year decreased by 36.6% (ibid).



Cohabitation, as an alternative to marriage, has increased substantially – both among couples with and without children. In 2021, there were 3.4 million opposite-sex cohabiting couples in England and Wales, up 137% from 1.5 million in 1996 (Office for National Statistics, 2022a). And cohabitation is not necessarily a pre-cursor to marriage prior to having children; over the same period, the number of opposite-sex cohabiting families with dependent children more than doubled from 539 thousand to 1,170 thousand.

² Marriage rates for 2020, whilst publicly available, were not quoted due to a significant reduction due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Lone parenthood has also become more common; in 2021, there were around 3 million lone parent families in the UK, accounting for 15.4% of all families. Since 1996, the number of lone parent families has risen from 2,445 thousand to 2,965 thousand. However, an even larger number of families will have experienced lone parent status, which is often temporary, at some point in time (Bernardi et al, 2018). While there has been little change in the legal statuses available to couples and parents over this period, with the introduction of Opposite Sex Civil Partnerships in 2019 heterosexual couples have been explicitly offered civil partnerships similar to those introduced for same-sex couples in 2013 – a legal alternative to marriage, affording them many of the same rights (UK Government, 2019).

Since 1989 we have tried to capture people's attitudes to these different family forms by asking how far they agree or disagree that:

People who want children ought to get married.

In 1994, we added two additional items asking whether people agreed with the following two statements:

One parent can bring up a child just as well as two parents together.

It is all right for a couple to live together without intending to get married.

The answers given in 2022, and on the previous occasions when these questions were asked, are presented in Table 1. They demonstrate that, with the exception of cohabitation for childless couples, the public is relatively evenly divided on the acceptability of different family forms. Around eight in ten agree that it is all right for a couple to live together without intending to get married; however, only half think that one parent can bring up a child as well as two (with around half being opposed to or ambivalent about this idea) and slightly less than half disagree that people who want to have children ought to get married (with around one quarter agreeing and three in ten neither agreeing nor disagreeing). Clearly then, there is lower support for a diversification of family forms when children are involved.

Nevertheless, acceptance of each of these non-traditional family forms has increased substantially over the past three or four decades. In 1994, around two-thirds (64%) of people agreed that it is all right for a couple to live together without intending to get married; 81% now express this view, with the bulk of the increase in support appearing to occur between 2012 and 2022. The 45% who disagree that people who want to have children ought to get married represents a more than doubling of the 17% in 1989 who expressed this view. Similarly, the proportion agreeing that one parent can bring up a child just as well as two has increased from 35% in 1994 to 50% now.

Table 1 Attitudes to different family forms, 1989–2022

	1989	1994	1998	2000	2002	2006	2010	2012	2014	2022
It is all right for a couple to live together without intending to get married	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	n/a	64	62	67	69	n/a	68	70	n/a	81
Neither	n/a	15	17	17	15	n/a	17	18	n/a	10
Disagree	n/a	19	17	14	14	n/a	11	11	n/a	8
<i>Unweighted base</i>		984	807	2980	1960		921	950		2239
People who want children ought to get married	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	70	57	n/a	53	51	n/a	42	42	37	24
Neither	10	14	n/a	19	17	n/a	23	23	24	30
Disagree	17	27	n/a	26	30	n/a	33	34	35	45
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1307	984		2980	1960		921	950	2376	2239
One parent can bring up a child just as well as two parents together	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	n/a	35	n/a	n/a	39	42	n/a	49	n/a	50
Neither	n/a	17	n/a	n/a	18	14	n/a	16	n/a	18
Disagree	n/a	46	n/a	n/a	40	41	n/a	34	n/a	31
<i>Unweighted base</i>		984			1960	2775		950		2239

n/a = Not asked

Table 2 presents the proportions of different groups, defined by demographic characteristics, who express support for the different non-traditional family forms discussed above. As we might expect, support for non-traditional family forms is greatest among younger age groups (among whom they are more prevalent) and lowest among older age groups. 58% of people aged 18-24 disagree that people who want to have children ought to get married, compared with 21% of those aged 70+. Similarly, the proportions of the youngest and oldest age groups who believe that one parent can bring up a child as well as two stand at 66% and 29% respectively. People who subscribe to a religion, particularly to one that is non-Christian, are less likely to express support for non-traditional family forms, a number of which are not advocated by particular faiths. So, for example, we see that 58% of people with no religion disagree that people who want to have children ought to get married, compared with just 34%, 30% and 13% of people affiliating with the Church of England, other Christian faiths and non-Christian faiths respectively. Similarly, 57% of people without a religion think that one parent can bring up a child just as well as two. However, just 43%, 42% and 36% of adherents to the Church of England, other Christian faiths and non-Christian faiths take this view. Interestingly, groups defined by religion are more consistent in their support for the idea that one parent can bring up a child just as well as two (something that happens in practice), compared with the ideas of couples or parents choosing not to get married (where the questions are phrased in terms of what is ideal).

People with a greater number of educational qualifications are substantially more likely to think that it is all right for a couple to live together without getting married, with 82% of those with degree-level qualifications expressing this view, compared with 63% of those with no qualifications. However, for family forms when children are involved, there is less evidence of any relationship between level of education and attitudes.

Table 2 Attitudes to family formation, by demographic characteristics

	Disagree that people who want children ought to get married	Agree that one parent can bring up a child as well as two parents together	Agree that it is all right for a couple to live together without intending to get married
	%	%	%
Sex			
Female	46	60	81
Male	43	42	81
Age group			
18-24	58	66	83
25-34	57	64	86
35-44	50	55	79
45-54	51	52	83
55-59	45	49	85
65-64	36	45	79
65-69	36	41	81
70+	21	29	73
Highest educational qualification			
Degree	44	45	82
Other higher education	41	42	82
A-level	52	58	84
Below A-level	44	56	84
No qualification	40	50	63
Religion			
Church of England / Anglican	34	43	78
Roman Catholic	41	55	74

Table 2 Attitudes to family formation, by demographic characteristics (continued)

	Disagree that people who want children ought to get married	Agree that one parent can bring up a child as well as two parents together	Agree that it is all right for a couple to live together without intending to get married
	%	%	%
Religion			
Other Christian	30	42	73
Non-Christian	13	36	35
No religion	58	57	93
All	45	51	81
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2239	2239	2239

Interestingly, while support for non-traditional family forms does not vary by sex across the board, women are markedly more supportive of lone parent families, with 60% agreeing that one parent can bring up a child as well as two, compared with just 42% of men. This may result from the fact that single parenthood is typically experienced by women, who currently constitute nine in ten single parents (Rabindrakumar, 2019) – meaning that women might have a greater awareness of or empathy for those in this position.

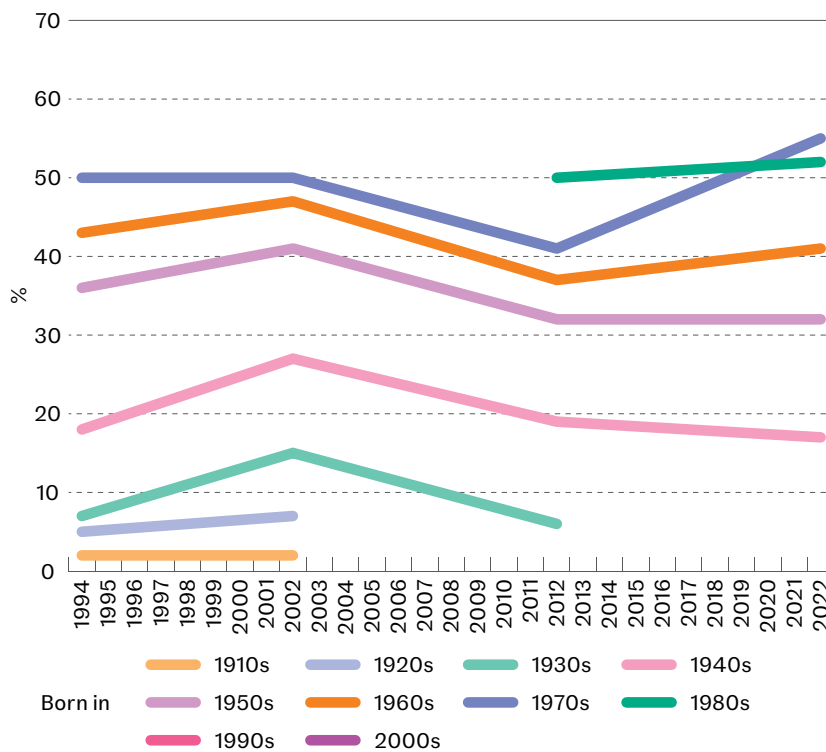
Regardless of the varying levels of support for non-traditional family forms in different sections of society noted above, across almost all groups there have been very marked and similar rises in acceptance of different family forms over the past three or four decades. Disagreement with the view that people who want children ought to get married has increased by 28 percentage points across society as a whole since 1989; meanwhile, the proportion of each age group expressing this view has increased by between 20 and 44 percentage points. Similarly, while agreement with the view that one parent can bring up a child as well as two has increased by 16 percentage points since 1994, groups defined by educational qualification have seen rises of between 13 and 25 percentage points. These trends might suggest that increases in the acceptance of non-traditional family forms have been generated by a ‘period’ effect, with the views of the whole of society shifting as family forms have become more diverse in practice, as outlined previously.

However, the fact that we find markedly more support for non-traditional family forms among younger age groups might imply that change at the population level can be explained by generational replacement, with younger generations who are more supportive at the outset gradually replacing older, less supportive, ones.

To explore these hypotheses, we undertook cohort analysis for each of the attitudes to family formation presented in Table 1. Figure 1 presents the proportions of individuals born in particular decades (termed ‘generations’ for the purpose of this analysis) who disagreed with the view that people who want children ought to get married, at approximately ten-yearly intervals. What might we expect to see in this chart if each of the hypotheses outlined above were to be correct? First of all, if we were to see a ‘period’ effect at play, we would expect each of the generational lines to rise to a similar degree across the same time period (during which all of society was affected by a shift in societal behaviour or thinking). However, if attitudes have primarily changed because of generational replacement, we would expect the attitudes of each generation to remain relatively stable over time, with each younger generation expressing more liberal views than its predecessor (and so the range of lines rising as older generations die out and younger generations come of age). Finally, if attitudinal change has been driven by a lifecycle effect, we might expect each generation to become more liberal in its views as it ages, with all lines rising in a similar degree, but at different points in time.

Figure 1 then clearly suggests that the liberalisation in attitudes towards people having children outside of marriage has primarily been driven by generational replacement. It clearly shows that the views of individual generations have changed little over the life-course, with societal change being largely driven by the replacement of older, less supportive generations, with younger, more supportive, ones. In 1994, the proportions of different generations disagreeing that people who want to have children ought to get married ranged between 2% and 50%; by 2022, generational replacement means that this range has risen to 17% to 60%.

Figure 1 Disagreement with view that people who want to have children ought to get married, by generational cohort, 1994-2022



The data on which Figure 1 is based can be found in Table A.1 in the appendix to this chapter

A similar pattern is evident when we examine agreement with the views that it is all right for a couple to live together without intending to get married and that one parent can bring up a child just as well as two. These trends reflect the findings of an earlier analysis, using European Social Survey data, which found that attitudes to cohabitation and having children outside of marriage have remained broadly consistent within each generation, with younger generations becoming successively more positive about these practices (Harrison, 2020).

How might we explain this pattern? We have seen that affiliating with particular religious faiths is strongly associated with views in this area, so we may be witnessing the declining importance of religious ideologies across society as a whole. Alternatively, it may be that, as each generation comes of age, their attitudes to family forms are influenced by those they see around them, and those being adopted by their own peer group (with cohabitation and lone parenthood being increasingly common among younger generations). It may be that attitudes to family forms are determined at this formative stage, and change little throughout the subsequent life-course, as individuals move forward with their own selected family forms. If this is the case and, coupled with a likely continued decline in religiosity, then we might expect to see support for alternative family forms increase in the future, assuming that their prevalence within society continues to increase or, at least, remains stable.

Sexual relationships

At the same time that non-traditional family forms have become more prevalent, so too has the visibility of sexual relationships (outside of heterosexual marriage) and the legislation supporting such relationships. We saw in the previous section how cohabiting relationships among heterosexual couples and parents have become markedly more common over the past four decades, with the introduction of the Opposite Sex Civil Partnerships in 2019 legally endorsing an alternative relationship form to marriage.



Over the same period, the direction and tone of legislation regarding relationships between individuals of the same sex, and the visibility of these relationships has changed markedly. While male homosexuality was decriminalized with the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 (a change that was only introduced in Scotland in 1981), gay men and lesbians continued to be perceived negatively over the following decades (UK Government, 1967). This was particularly the case in the 1980s, with the arrival of HIV-AIDS in the early 1980s and 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” (UK Government, 1988).

In the subsequent two decades, homosexual relationships came to be more visible and positively viewed, with the first gay pride events taking place in the early 1990s, the passing of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 (UK Government, 1994) reducing the age of consent for homosexual sex, eventually lowered to 16 in 2001, and the eventual repeal of Section 28 in England and Wales as part of the Local Government Act 2003 (its Scottish equivalent having been repealed a few years earlier in 2000) (UK Government, 2003). In 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 (UK Government, 2004a) while, more recently, the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act was introduced in 2013, leading to many gay couples taking up this option or converting their civil partnerships to marriage (UK Government, 2013).

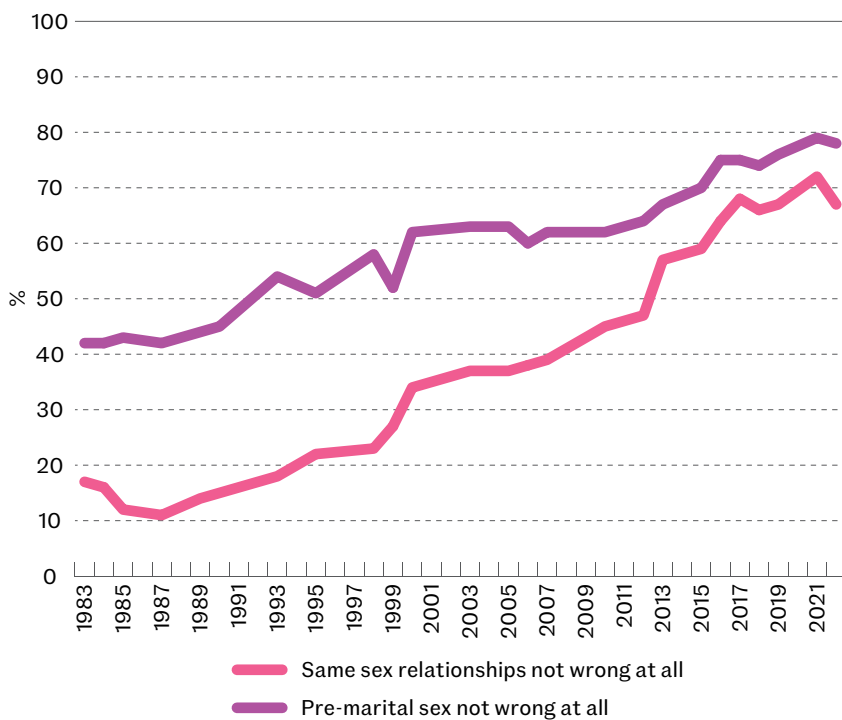
To measure public support for sexual relationships outside of heterosexual marriage, since 1983 we have asked people whether they think particular sexual relationships are “always wrong”, “mostly wrong”, “sometimes wrong”, “rarely wrong” or “never wrong”. Specifically, we have asked about “sexual relations between two adults of the same sex”, “sexual relations before marriage” and “a married person having sexual relations with someone other than his or her partner”.

The latter scenario, which is contrary to the tenets of traditional marriage, has consistently been viewed negatively by the public; 58% thought that extra-marital sex was always wrong in 1983, a proportion which remained remarkably stable over the subsequent four decades and stands at 57% now, with more than eight in ten people on both occasions viewing this as being always or mostly wrong. However, attitudes to pre-marital sex and sexual relations between two adults of the same sex show no such consistency, as shown in Figure 2.

In both cases, the proportion of people regarding the prescribed type of sexual relationship as “not wrong at all” has increased markedly over the past four decades. 42% of people in 1983 viewed pre-marital sex as not wrong at all, compared with 78% today. And, even more starkly, 17% expressed this view in relation to homosexual relationships in 1983, compared with 67% now. Over the same period, it is worth noting that the proportion identifying such sexual relations as “always wrong” declined from 16% to 4% for pre-marital sex, and, even more dramatically, from 50% to 9% for homosexual sex.

We can see from Figure 2 that positive views about both forms of sexual relationship have increased steadily over the past four decades, with some evidence of these levelling off in the last eight or so years. However, it is interesting to note that approval of homosexual relationships appears to have responded to events occurring in wider society, with a dip in support in the early to mid-1980s, with the onset of HIV-AIDS and the subsequent introduction of Section 28, and a marked rise in support around 2013, around the time of the introduction of the Same Sex Marriages Act. These blips are not evident in relation to support for pre-marital sex and suggest that, for some people at least, the legislative position and popular discussion in relation to homosexual relationships has the power to influence their views, either positively or negatively.

Figure 2 Attitudes to same-sex relationships and pre-marital sex, 1983-2022



The data on which Figure 2 is based can be found in Table A.2 in the appendix to this chapter

Table 3 presents the proportions of different groups, defined by demographic characteristics, who express support for non-traditional sexual relationships. It clearly demonstrates that, as was the case for support for alternative family forms, support for non-traditional sexual relationships is greatest among younger age groups and among those not subscribing to a particular religion. 92% of those with no religion consider pre-marital sex to be not at all wrong, compared with between 32% and 75% of groups subscribing to particular religions. More markedly, 81% of people who do not subscribe to a religion consider sexual relations between two people of the same sex to be not at all wrong, compared with between 35% and 59% of each group defined by a religion. When it comes to age, we see that 89% of those aged 18-24 view pre-marital sex as not at all wrong, with 64% of those aged 70+ taking this view (the equivalent figures in relation to homosexual relationships are 74% and 45%). In addition, and contrary to what we found in relation to non-traditional family forms (where there was little evidence of a relationship between level of education and attitudes), being more highly educated is associated with greater support for non-traditional sexual relationships. 78% of people with a degree think that pre-marital sex is not at all wrong, compared with 62% of those with no qualifications (the equivalent proportions who view homosexual relationships as not at all wrong are 69% and 46%).

Table 3 Attitudes to family formation, by demographic characteristics

	Pre-marital sex not at all wrong	Sexual relations between two people of the same sex not at all wrong
	%	%
Sex		
Female	77	72
Male	80	62
Age group		
18-24	89	74
25-34	83	77
35-44	77	70
45-54	85	73
55-59	82	77
65-64	76	64
65-69	75	57
70+	64	45
Highest educational qualification		
Degree	78	69
Other higher education	75	69
A-level	85	73
Below A-level	82	66
No qualification	62	46
Religion		
Church of England / Anglican	73	59
Roman Catholic	75	53
Other Christian	64	55

Table 3 Attitudes to family formation, by demographic characteristics (continued)

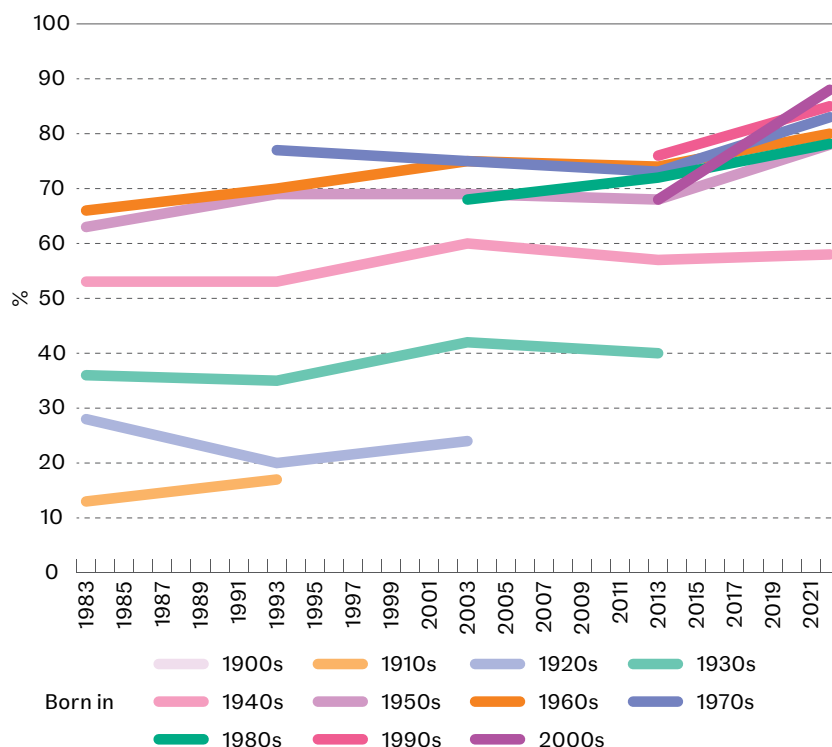
	Pre-marital sex not at all wrong	Sexual relations between two people of the same sex not at all wrong
	%	%
Religion		
Non-Christian	32	35
No religion	92	81
All	79	67
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2239	2239

However, once again, we see that views have shifted markedly among all groups over the past four decades. So, for example, agreement with the view that sexual relationships between two people of the same sex are not at all wrong has increased by 50 percentage points since 1983, across society as a whole; among groups defined by age, agreement has risen by between 47 and 57 percentage points respectively while, among groups defined by sex, agreement has risen by between 46 and 54 percentage points. When it comes to pre-marital sex, the views of the oldest groups have changed the most (with agreement with the view that pre-marital sex is not at all wrong having increased by 62 percentage points among those aged 70+, compared with an increase of 37 percentage points across the population as a whole) – but this is simply a function of the fact that the younger age groups were relatively supportive to start with, limiting the extent to which their support could potentially increase.

We have seen that acceptance of sexual relationships between people who are not married and between two members of the same sex has increased, as these relationships have become more visible in society and have received greater legislative endorsement, while support for homosexual relationships has also tended to dip when legislation and public discussion has treated these negatively. This might imply that views on these matters have changed because of a period effect or a series of period effects. However, the enduring relationships between religious affiliation, education and age, and attitudes to non-traditional sexual relationships, might alternatively imply that society as a whole has become more liberal on these matters as older, more religious and less educated generations have been replaced by younger, less religious, and more educated ones.

Our cohort analysis suggests that both of these theories are correct, to some degree. When it comes to the shifting views of generations in relation to pre-marital sex, depicted in Figure 3, we see a pattern very similar to that observed in relation to support for different family forms. In general, the views of individual generations have remained relatively static over time, with the driving force of change being the replacement of older, less supportive, generations, by younger, more supportive ones. However, given the very similar trajectories in attitudes exhibited by generations born in the 1950s and beyond, the power of generational replacement to drive societal change has become much more limited in the last decade or so. It is also worth noting potential evidence of a period effect since 2012, with all except the oldest generation becoming more supportive over the subsequent decade. This might be attributable to changes in individual behaviour or societal structures; it could be a function of declining marriage rates and the increase in cohabiting relationships noted previously or a response to public debate around the introduction of opposite-sex civil partnerships, as a legal alternative to marriage (signalling official support for family forms – and thus sexual relationships – outside of marriage).

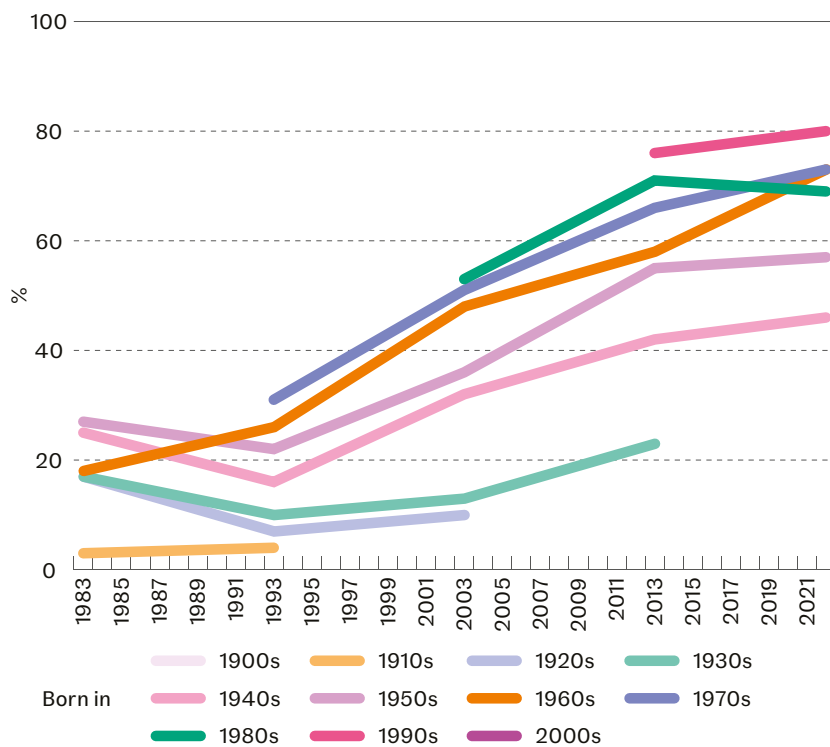
Figure 3 Attitudes to pre-marital sex, by generation cohort, 1983-2022



The data on which Figure 3 is based can be found in Table A.3 in the appendix to this chapter

However, as shown in Figure 4, the explanation for the dramatic increase in public acceptance of homosexual relationships appears to be rather different. Certainly, there is evidence of the rise in support for these relationships being driven by generational replacement, with each younger generation becoming consecutively more supportive, compared with its predecessor. However, there is also considerable evidence of a societal effect; with the support of all generations increasing substantially from the 1990s, when the legislative position and public discussion in relation to same-sex relationships became rather more positive than it had been previously. While the rise in acceptance appears to have levelled off in the past eight years across all generations, we would nevertheless expect to see acceptance increasing further in future decades, given the greater level of acceptance among younger generations; it may simply be that generational effects, compared with period effects, take longer to materialise.

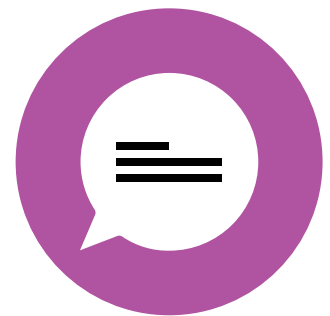
Figure 4 Attitudes to homosexual sex, by generation cohort, 1983-2022



The data on which Figure 4 is based can be found in Table A.4 in the appendix to this chapter

Abortion

When it comes to abortion, we do not see the degree of legislative and behavioural change which we have witnessed in relation to family formation and sexual relationships over the past four decades; however, the terms and nature of the debate around this topic have evolved considerably over that period. Abortions have been legally permitted in Britain since 1967, when the Abortion Act permitted abortions to be performed for pregnancies under 28 weeks in a range of circumstances – including the risk of the pregnancy to the woman’s life, to her own physical or mental health, or that of her existing children, or if there was a significant risk that the child would be born with serious physical or mental disability (UK Government, 1967). Over the subsequent decades, advances in medical science which increased a premature baby’s chance of survival led to debate around this cut off, with the 1990 Human Embryology and Human Fertilisation Act reducing the time limit from 28 to 24 weeks, while allowing for later-term abortions in special circumstance where there is grave risk to the mother or severe foetal abnormality (UK Government, 1990). Similarly, there have been advances in the process of administering abortions, with the home use of both pills for abortions made permanent in England and Wales in 2022 (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2023).



Beyond this, and despite a number of private members bills introduced to change abortion law, the 1967 Act continues to govern abortions in England, Scotland and Wales. Nevertheless, political debate and legislative change elsewhere has attracted considerable media attention and generated popular debate in Britain, most recently around the legalisation of abortion in 2018 in the Irish Republic, the introduction of a new legal framework for abortion in Northern Ireland in March 2020 and the over-ruling of Roe-Wade (which stated that the constitution protected an individual's right to end a pregnancy) by the Supreme Court in the United States in June 2022.

While rates of abortion in Britain have fluctuated over time, in 2021 there were 214,256 abortions for women resident in England and Wales, the highest number since the Abortion Act was introduced – with an age standardised abortion rate for residents of 18.6 per 1,000 women (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2023). However, the profile of women receiving abortions has changed over time, with a decline in rates for women under 18 and an increase among women aged 30 to 34 (ibid).

To understand the extent to which people think abortion should be allowed in different circumstances, since 1983 we have asked respondents whether they think the law should allow abortion if:

The woman decides on her own she does not wish to have a child

The woman is not married and does not wish to marry the man

The couple cannot afford any more children

There is a strong chance of the baby having a serious health condition

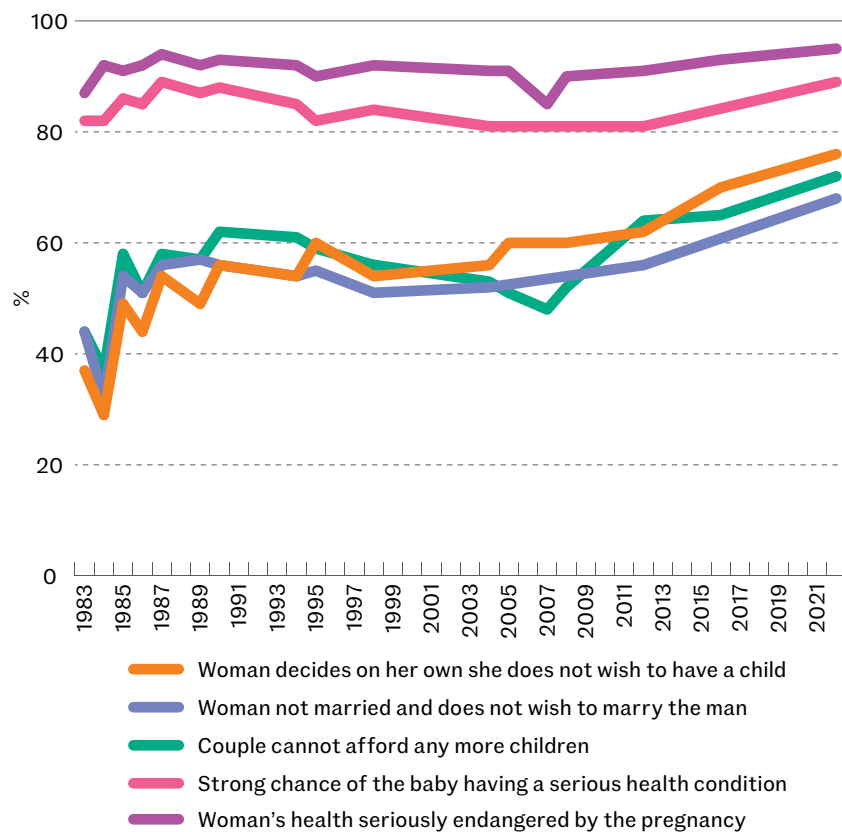
The woman's health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy

The answers obtained in 2022, and on each occasion when these questions were previously asked, are depicted in Figure 5. They clearly demonstrate that people do not support abortion per se, but that, for a substantial minority, their support is dependent on the different circumstances in which this might be undertaken. We see almost universal support for abortions being allowed when the woman's health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy or when there is a strong chance of the baby having a serious health condition, with 95% and 89% respectively thinking that abortion should be allowed in these circumstances.

However, when a health concern is not present, support for abortion being allowed drops somewhat to between two-thirds and three-quarters. 76% think that abortion should be allowed if the woman decides on her own that she does not want to have a child, 72% when the couple cannot afford any more children and 68% when the woman does not wish to marry the man.

While the public have always differentiated between the contexts in which abortion might be allowed, it is nevertheless the case that support for abortions being allowed has risen in all scenarios over the past four decades. These rises in support are most pronounced for those scenarios where there was traditionally least public support; most markedly, support for abortion being allowed in circumstances when the woman decides on her own that she does not want to have a child has risen by 39 percentage points between 1983 and 2022 – from 37% to 76%. In other words, we are generally more supportive of abortions being allowed than we were four decades ago – and are less likely to differentiate between the circumstances leading to their request, compared with in the past. Much of this change occurred in the 1980s specifically – and may have been the result of a period effect, in terms of the discourse on abortions becoming more tolerant or individuals being more likely to have experienced issues relating to abortions within their own families and peer groups, as this practice became much more common throughout the 1970s. We return to this point when we consider how the views of different generations have changed over time.

Figure 5 Support for a woman having an abortion in different scenarios, 1983-2022



The data on which Figure 5 is based can be found in Table A.5 in the appendix to this chapter

Support for abortions being allowed varies substantially by level of education and religious group. People with higher educational qualifications are much more supportive of abortions being allowed in each scenario asked about; for instance, 80% of people with a degree think that an abortion should be allowed if the woman decides on her own that she does not want the child, compared with 54% of those with no qualifications. This remains the case, albeit to a lesser degree, in those scenarios in which there is more universal support for abortions being allowed. 97% of people with a degree think an abortion should be allowed if a woman's health would be seriously endangered by the pregnancy, compared with 87% of those with no qualifications.

Interestingly, the views of the more educated groups have moved the greatest distance in a liberal direction over the past four decades, meaning that groups defined by education are more divided by this issue now, than they were in the past. The proportion of people believing that abortion should be allowed if the woman decides on her own that she does not want a child has increased by 36 percentage points among those with a degree since 1985, compared with an increase of just 13 percentage points for those with no qualifications. This pattern is evident across a range of scenarios with, in some instance, the views of those with no educational qualifications having barely changed at all over the past four decades. It should be borne in mind, however, that the groups of people with no qualifications and degree-level qualifications have shrunk in size and expanded respectively over the past four decades – meaning we are not necessarily comparing like with like.

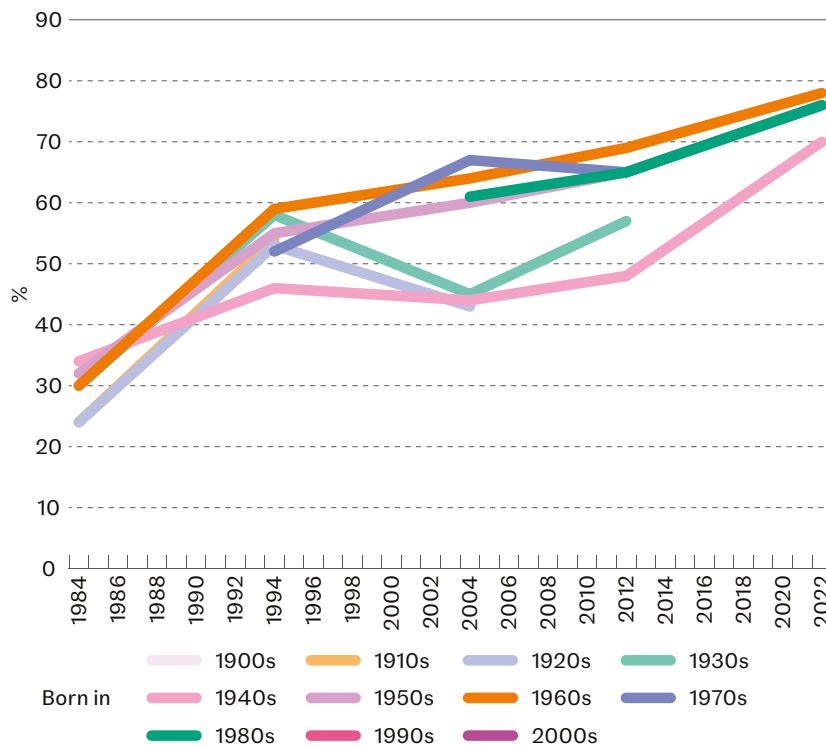
Religious affiliation also appears to influence attitudes – which is unsurprising given that a number of faiths – particularly Roman Catholicism – condemn abortion. Given this context, it is worth noting that more than half of each group defined by religion supports abortion in each of the circumstances asked about. Nevertheless, we find that support among people with a religion, and Catholics specifically, is particularly low. For instance, 84% of people with no religious affiliation think that abortion should be allowed if the woman decides on her own that she does not want a child; this figure drops to 58% among Catholics and 62%-72% among all other groups defined by religion. Similarly, 76% of people with no religion think that an abortion should be allowed if the woman does not want to marry the man, with this figure standing at 50% for Catholics and 54%-64% of all other groups defined by religious affiliation.

Unsurprisingly, women are more likely to support abortion in the scenario where the woman decides on her own that she does not want to have the child, with 81% thinking that abortion should be allowed in these circumstances, compared with 71% of men. There are no substantial differences between the views of the two sexes for other scenarios, however.

Interestingly, there are few substantive differences in opinion by age; we do not see here a clear pattern of younger age groups adopting the more liberal stance, as was the case with attitudes to family formation and sexual relationships. This might lead us to conclude that the increasing liberalisation in attitudes towards abortion may not primarily have been driven by generational replacement, although we should bear in mind the clear links between levels of education and religiosity and attitudes in this area, with each generation known to be more educated and less religious than the one that preceded it.

To explore this issue further, we undertook cohort analysis for the three scenarios for which we have seen a substantive change in attitudes since 1983 – that abortion should be allowed if the woman decides on her own that she does not wish to have a child, that abortion should be allowed if the woman does not wish to marry the man, and that abortion should be allowed if the couple do not want any more children. In each case, it appears that views have become more liberal due a period effect – with the views of all generations becoming more liberal over time – perhaps as abortion became increasingly accepted in public discourse, as reflected in legislation, or perhaps as individuals became more likely to have experienced issues relating to abortion themselves, or among their family and peer groups. This pattern is typified by Figure 6, which shows how support for abortions being allowed if the woman does not want to marry the man has risen at a similar pace across all generations over the past four decades, with different generations being rather similar in their attitudes, both in 1984 and 2022 (with the views of all generations falling within a range of 14 percentage points and 8 percentage points respectively in these two years). As noted previously, society as a whole became markedly more accepting of abortion during the 1980s – and Figure 6 clearly exemplifies that this was a development which affected all generations – and thus may result from a period effect relating to more positive discourse regarding abortions and more widespread experience of the issues involved. This trend suggests that we cannot simply assume that abortion will continue to become more widely accepted as older generations die off; societal structures and popular discussion and, perhaps, individual behaviour, clearly matter and are likely to continue to have a role to play moving forward.

Figure 6 Support for a woman being allowed to have an abortion if she does not wish to marry the man, by generation cohort, 1984-2002

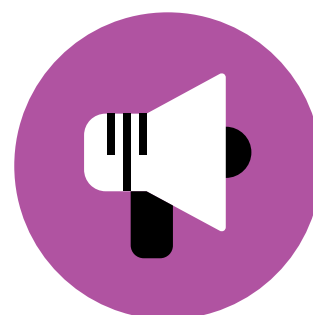


The data on which Figure 6 is based can be found in Table A.6 in the appendix to this chapter

Thus far, we have uncovered a wealth of evidence supporting the idea of a liberalisation in attitudes to moral issues among the British public over the past four decades, with people having become much more accepting of alternative family forms, pre-marital sex, homosexual sex and abortions than they were four decades ago. However, a process of liberalisation on all such issues cannot be assumed; attitudes to extra-marital sex have not shifted at all, and context clearly plays a part – with society remaining relatively divided on the acceptance of alternative family forms when children are involved, or of abortion in scenarios where there is not a risk to a person’s health, although support in the latter case has risen most markedly from a relatively low base. The process of attitudinal change is also far from uniform. While much of the liberalisation in attitudes can simply be explained by generational replacement, we also see strong evidence of period effects, particularly in relation to attitudes to homosexual relationships and to abortion. Using this evidence, we finally turn to consider attitudes to a more contemporary moral issue – people who are transgender – and how we might understand these – given this broader knowledge base, and without the benefit of a longer time series.

Attitudes towards people who are transgender

The legal position and rights of people who are transgender has emerged as a contentious issue in recent years. The Gender Recognition Act 2004, an act of Parliament that allows people who have, or have had, gender dysphoria to change their legal gender, came into effect on 4th April 2005 (UK Government, 2004b). The subsequent period saw increased media coverage of and public discussion of the rights and recognition of transgender people, around such issues as the access of trans women to women-only spaces and their right to compete in female-only competitive sports.



Such heightened discussion led the Conservative government in 2018 to issue a consultation paper exploring, for England and Wales, the possibility of removing the requirement of someone who wanted to change their gender acquiring a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria (UK Government, 2018). Although this change was ultimately abandoned, it fuelled considerable public debate – with the results of the public consultation, published in September 2020, seemingly suggesting wide support for all aspects of reform, including 64% in favour of removing the requirement for a diagnosis of gender dysphoria and 80% in favour of removing the requirement for a medical report (UK Government, 2020) – although it should be noted that these results may not necessarily accurately reflect the balance of public opinion. Policy in Scotland followed a similar direction, but instead of abandoning the idea, the Scottish Government steered legislation through the Scottish Parliament, though its proposals became the subject of considerable controversy (Scottish Parliament 2022).

The Gender Recognition Reform Bill passed in October 2022 removed the need for applicants to have a diagnosis of gender dysphoria, as well as dropping the age limit for gender recognition from 18 to 16 (Scottish Parliament, 2022), but was ultimately over-ruled by the Westminster government, who invoked Article 35 of the 1998 Scotland Act, claiming the Bill was at odds with equality legislation, an area controlled by Westminster (a ruling that is currently being challenged in the Courts). As a measure of the extent of public debate regarding the rights of people who are transgender, the Independent Press Standards Organisation has estimated that such developments led to an estimated four-fold increase in press coverage between 2015 and 2020 (Independent Press Standards Organisation, 2020).

In order to explore views towards people who are transgender, we have included a number of questions on this topic on the BSA survey since 2016. In 2022, we repeated two items on this issue, having first explained that:

People who are transgender have gone through all or part of a process (including thoughts or actions) to change the sex they were described as at birth to the gender they identify with, or intended to. This might include by changing their name, wearing different clothes, taking hormones or having gender reassignment surgery.

To measure general prejudice towards people who are transgender, we asked respondents:

***How would you describe yourself...
..as very prejudiced against people who are transgender,
a little prejudiced,
or, not prejudiced at all?***

To explore views about the idea of a transgender person having the right to have the sex on their birth certificate changed, we asked:

How much do you agree or disagree that a person who is transgender should be able to have the sex recorded on their birth certificate changed if they want? ³

³ Prior to 2021, this question was “How much do you agree or disagree that a person who is transgender should be able to have the sex on their birth certificate changed if they want to”.

The answers provided in 2022 and on the previous occasions when the two questions were asked are presented in Table 4. They clearly exemplify that people have mixed views on this matter. While around two-thirds (64%) describe themselves as “not at all prejudiced” against people who are transgender, almost three in ten describe themselves as being “a little prejudiced” with more than one in twenty describing themselves as “very prejudiced”. Invariably, social desirability may limit the extent to which people are willing to admit to prejudice within the context of social research (although its impact is likely to have reduced with the transition of the survey to an online mode in 2020). We have asked a comparable item about prejudice towards “people of other races” since 1983. It is interesting to note that the proportion describing themselves as not at all prejudiced against people of other races was 83% in 2019, the last occasion on which this question was asked. This implies that more people are prejudiced towards people who are transgender – or at least perceive it to be socially acceptable to admit to this.

Moreover, the public appears to be divided regarding the desirability of a person who is transgender having the right to have the sex recorded on their birth certificate changed if they want; while three in ten people think that a person who is transgender should be able to do this, almost four in ten disagree that this should be the case, with the remaining three in ten selecting “neither agree nor disagree”, thus expressing a degree of ambivalence on this matter.

Table 4 Attitudes towards people who are transgender, 2016–2022

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2021	2022
Self-described level of prejudice towards people who are transgender	%	%	%	%	%	%
Very prejudiced	2	2	3	2	n/a	6
A little prejudiced	15	13	12	14	n/a	27
Not prejudiced	82	84	83	82	n/a	64
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>974</i>	<i>3011</i>	<i>2884</i>	<i>3224</i>		<i>3389</i>
Agreement that person who is transgender should be able to have the sex on their birth certificate changed if they want	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	58	n/a	n/a	53	32	30
Neither	18	n/a	n/a	21	28	29
Disagree	22	n/a	n/a	24	39	39
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>974</i>			<i>3224</i>	<i>3112</i>	<i>2202</i>

n/a = Not asked

In both cases, the proportion adopting the ‘liberal’ position has reduced substantially since 2016, with most of this reduction occurring between 2019 and 2022. The proportion characterising themselves as “not at all prejudiced” has fallen by 18 percentage points over the past three years, while the proportion thinking someone who is transgender should be allowed to change the sex on their birth certificate has fallen by 23 percentage points over the same period. These changes in attitudes are substantial, and their direction and timing suggest that they have been largely triggered by the intense political debate and media discussion on both sides of the border regarding the easing of the circumstances in which someone can be diagnosed as transgender (and thus allowed to reflect this on their birth certificate).

This debate is also likely to have increased public ambivalence or uncertainty around this issue, as people have been exposed to the complexities involved in the journeys of people who are transgender; the proportion neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the idea of a person who is transgender being allowed to change their sex on their birth certificate has increased by eight percentage points since 2019. Overall, this shift in public opinion reflects the findings of ongoing data collection by YouGov, showing evidence of “an overall gradual erosion in support towards transgender rights” since 2018, with the shift in some areas being very pronounced (YouGov, 2022).

Table 5 presents the proportions of groups defined by a range of demographic characteristics that express particular attitudes towards people who are transgender. It clearly demonstrates that views towards people who are transgender are not uniform across different sections of society. We see that women, younger age groups, those with higher levels of educational qualifications and those who do not affiliate with a particular religion are more likely to express liberal views towards people who are transgender – with the first two trends being supported by YouGov data (YouGov, 2022). 71% of women describe themselves as not at all prejudiced against people who are transgender, compared with 57% of men. This view is expressed by 69% of those aged 18-24, compared with 51% of those aged 70+, 70% of those with no religion (compared with between 52% and 62% of those who affiliate with particular faiths), and 66% of those with a degree, compared with 52% of those with no qualifications. Similar differences in opinion are evident in relation to whether someone should be allowed to have the sex on their birth certificate changed or not.

Table 5 Attitudes to people who are transgender, by demographic characteristics

	Not at all prejudiced towards people who are transgender	Agreement that person who is transgender should be able to have sex on birth certificate changed
	%	%
Sex		
Female	71	33
Male	57	27
Age group		
18-24	69	43
25-34	69	37
35-44	65	34
45-54	66	26
55-59	68	26
65-64	65	26
65-69	59	20
70+	51	22
Highest educational qualification		
Degree	66	36
Other higher education	68	29
A-level	66	30
Below A-level	63	24
No qualification	52	25
Religion		
Church of England / Anglican	57	20
Roman Catholic	62	23

Table 5 Attitudes to people who are transgender, by demographic characteristics (continued)

	Not at all prejudiced towards people who are transgender	Agreement that person who is transgender should be able to have sex on birth certificate changed
	%	%
Religion		
Other Christian	59	25
Non-Christian	52	21
No religion	70	37
All	64	30
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3389	2202

Interestingly, these are the very same divisions that we witness in relation to other moral issues, both currently and in the past; in fact, earlier BSA chapters have argued that the balance of opinion in relation to homosexuality in the 1980s operates on very similar lines to those which we see in relation to people who are transgender today (Swales and Taylor, 2017; Albakri et al, 2019). However, since 2016 (and 2019 in particular), the views of all demographic groups on these two matters have changed to a relatively similar degree, strongly suggesting that the decline in the liberal position reflects a period effect, with all groups being influenced by the prolific coverage and discussion of issues relating to this group. In other words, we may be seeing a period effect similar to that which we witnessed in the 1980s for attitudes to homosexual relationships, with the emergence of HIV-AIDS and the introduction of Section 28. The substantial impact of this period effect inevitably makes it challenging to predict how views on this matter might evolve in the future. Previous analysis suggests that progressive policy-making may alter people's views (Swales and Attar, 2017) – but it may in fact be the case that policy-making has moved too far beyond the public consensus in the past three years, instead provoking a backlash.

A process of liberalisation?

The evidence reviewed in this chapter in relation to sexual relationships, family formation, abortion and people who are transgender suggests that the characterisation of the last four decades as involving a 'liberalisation in moral attitudes' is something of a simplification; certainly, in most (but not all) instances, attitudes have tended to move in a liberal direction, but the pace and drivers of change have been highly nuanced in each area. This diversity in trends raises the question of how attitudes towards each of the areas examined might be related to each other and to what extent a general increase in a liberal outlook across society (explored in greater detail in our chapter on age) may be driving attitudinal shifts in these specific areas. In this regard, it is worth focusing, in particular, on those two areas where attitudes have not moved in a liberal direction – namely attitudes towards extra-marital sex and towards people who are transgender. To what extent are attitudes in these areas associated with attitudes to other moral issues, and, in the case of extra-marital sex, if there is a substantial association, why then have attitudes not followed the general trend of becoming more liberal over time?

While opportunities to compare attitudes across the four areas of interest are constrained by the varied placement of items across different years and questionnaire versions, it is nevertheless possible to cross-compare attitudes to sexual relationships (pre-marital and extra-marital sex) with attitudes to family formation – both today and in the 1980s when these questions were first asked. It is similarly possible to compare attitudes towards people who are transgender, attitudes to abortion and attitudes to sexual relationships (homosexual sex).



This analysis clearly demonstrates that people who hold a liberal view in one of these areas are more likely to do so in another, although this relationship becomes less strong, as the proximity of the subject matter declines. So, for example, as shown in Table 6, we find that those who express a traditional (non-liberal) attitude towards pre-marital sex are much more likely to express a non-liberal position with regards to extra-marital sex, than those who express a liberal view. Almost everyone (99%) who thinks that pre-marital sex is always wrong, also thinks that extra-marital sex is always wrong. This proportion declines to 80% among those who think that pre-marital sex is mostly wrong and 67%, 51% and 54% of those who think that pre-marital sex is sometimes, rarely or not at all wrong. In other words, while at least half of each group express the view that extra-marital sex is always wrong, there is clear evidence that wider views about sexual relationships may be impacting on views in this area. This was also found to be the case for attitudes to marriage. In general, those who express a traditional standpoint in relation to marriage are much more likely to express a non-liberal view in relation to extra-marital sex. Most markedly, 85% of those who disagree that it is all right for a couple to live together without getting married think that extra-marital sex is always wrong, compared with 53% of those who agree that cohabitation is acceptable. Similarly, 70% of those who think that people who want children ought to get married think that extra-marital sex is always wrong, compared with 52% of those who disagree with this premise. In both these instances (cohabitation and having children), the implication is that a couple would be having a sexual relationship outside of marriage; clearly, disagreement with the idea that sex outside of marriage is acceptable is, to some degree, upholding high levels of disapproval regarding extra-marital sex.

Table 6 Attitudes to extra-marital sex, by views on pre-marital sex and marriage

		% think extra-marital sex always wrong	% think extra-marital sex is sometimes / rarely / not at all wrong / it depends	<i>Unweighted base</i>
Pre-marital sex				
Always wrong	%	99	1	74
Not wrong at all	%	54	17	1776
People who want children ought to get married				
Agree	%	70	8	574
Disagree	%	52	19	971
It is all right for a couple to live together without intending to get married				
Agree	%	53	16	1839
Disagree	%	85	4	151

Such associations were also evident in the 1980s, when these questions were first included on the survey, and indeed there is some evidence that they may be becoming weaker over time. In 1983, 98% of people who thought that pre-marital sex is always wrong also expressed this view in relation to extra-marital sex, compared with 44% of those who thought that pre-marital sex was not wrong at all (a gap of 54 percentage points, compared with a gap of 45 percentage points now). Similarly, the association between our first measure of attitudes to marriage, included on the 1989 survey, and attitudes to extra-marital sex was stronger then than it is today. In 1989, 61% of those who agreed that people who wanted children ought to get married expressed the view that extra-marital sex is always wrong, compared with 38% of those who disagreed (a difference of 23 percentage points, compared with 19 percentage points today).

A similar pattern emerges when we compare levels of prejudice towards people who are transgender with closely linked (same-sex relationships) and less closely linked (abortion) moral issues. Attitudes towards same-sex relationships are strongly linked with levels of prejudice towards people who are transgender. 43% of people who think that same-sex relationships are always wrong describe themselves as very prejudiced towards people who are transgender, compared with 27% of those who think that they are mostly wrong, and 5%, 1% and 1% of those who think that they are sometimes, rarely or never wrong. Clearly, these data suggest that attitudes to non-traditional sexual relationships are strongly associated with attitudes to non-traditional identities. However, the relationship between attitudes to people who are transgender and attitudes to abortion (two moral issues which are conceptually some way apart) is less marked. In each instance, people who oppose an abortion being allowed are more likely to describe themselves as prejudiced towards people who are transgender, compared with those who think that abortions should be allowed. Most markedly, 26% of those who think an abortion should not be allowed if a woman's health is seriously endangered by a pregnancy describe themselves as very prejudiced towards people who are transgender, compared with 5% of those who think an abortion should be allowed in these circumstances (with the proportions of each group describing themselves as "not prejudiced at all" standing at 64% and 47% respectively). However, the associations between attitudes towards people who are transgender and support for abortions being allowed are somewhat weaker in those circumstances where abortions attract less universal public support; these limited associations are interesting, given that abortion is traditionally defined as a feminist issue, while feminists sometimes oppose the liberal position in the transgender debate, for instance with reference to transgender women being allowed to access women-only spaces. It may be that such opposing viewpoints mean that attitudes towards people who are transgender are somewhat at odds with some of the wider belief systems (such as feminism) that have contributed towards the liberalisation of moral attitudes over the past four decades. Once again, the varying nature and strength of these associations confirm the sheer complexity of the inter-relationships between our moral attitudes and how these have changed over time.

Conclusion

While changes in moral attitudes undoubtedly constitute the greatest substantive shift in society's thinking over the past four decades, the evidence presented in this chapter suggests that the concept of a "liberalisation in moral attitudes" is something of a simplification. While we are generally more liberal about non-traditional family forms and sexual relationships, and about abortion, than we were four decades ago, context clearly matters. While shifts in favour of a liberal position have occurred in relation to non-traditional family forms when children are involved and to abortions when there is no health concern, we remain somewhat divided on these issues; moreover, attitudes to extra-marital sex have not changed at all over the past four decades. Nor has the process of liberalisation been a seamless one; while our attitudes have tended to become gradually more liberal when being driven by generational replacement, resulting from declines in religiosity, a rise in education and long-term changes in individual behaviour, our attitudes to homosexual relationships have fluctuated in response to how society has dealt with this issue, with the same trend currently being apparent in relation to people who are transgender. The process of liberalisation has clearly operated in rather different ways for the three moral issues examined – and needs to be understood in relation to the context and nuances of these specific issues – and the varied associations that exist between them.



This makes it somewhat challenging to predict what might happen going forward; while we might expect a gradual further liberalisation of attitudes where this has primarily been driven by generational replacement and evolving individual behaviour to date, where short-term period effects have had a greater role to play (as in relation to attitudes to homosexual relationships and people who are transgender), we need to be cautious in making predictions, as we have seen that views have the potential to shift more rapidly, and in either direction. Perhaps we can conclude that future attitudinal change is likely to be more volatile in relation to those moral issues which individuals are less likely to encounter in their own lives. The experiences of forming relationships and having children are somewhat more universal than the experiences of being homosexual or identifying as transgender, perhaps meaning that shifts in legislative or public discussion can exert a more dramatic effect on attitudes in the latter areas. Whilst homosexual relationships are now widely accepted and supported legislatively, with little apparent reason for this support to decline, we might conclude that policy-makers need to take on board the current divided state of attitudes towards people who are transgender, when developing future policy on this issue, if they wish for it, and public attitudes, to ultimately move in a more liberal direction.

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Appendix

Table A.1 Disagreement with view that people who want to have children ought to get married, by generational cohort, 1994-2022

Disagree that people who want to have children ought to get married	1910s	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
1994	2%	5%	7%	18%	36%	43%	50%			
<i>Unweighted base</i>	60	133	134	160	174	238	78			
2002	2%	7%	15%	27%	41%	47%	50%			
<i>Unweighted base</i>	160	221	310	311	417	350	148			
2012			6%	19%	32%	37%	41%	50%		
<i>Unweighted base</i>			97	187	155	164	154	114		
2022				17%	32%	41%	55%	52%	55%	60%
<i>Unweighted base</i>				213	403	386	316	404	360	85

Table A.2 Attitudes to same-sex relationships and pre-marital sex, 1983-2022

	1983	1984	1985	1987	1989	1990	1993	1995	1998	1999
Same sex relationships not wrong at all	17%	16%	12%	11%	14%	15%	18%	22%	23%	27%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1761	1675	1804	1437	1513	1397	1484	1172	1075	1052
Pre-marital sex not wrong at all	42%	42%	43%	42%	44%	45%	54%	51%	58%	52%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1761	1675	1804	1437	1513	1397	1484	1172	1075	1052
	2000	2003	2005	2006	2007	2010	2012	2013	2015	2016
Same sex relationships not wrong at all	34%	37%	37%	38%	39%	45%	47%	57%	59%	64%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3426	2139	2102	1093	1030	1081	1103	1097	3245	974
Pre-marital sex not wrong at all	62%	63%	63%	60%	62%	62%	64%	67%	70%	75%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3426	2139	2102	1093	1030	1081	1103	1097	3245	974
	2017	2018	2019	2021	2022					
Same sex relationships not wrong at all	68%	66%	67%	72%	67%					
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3004	2884	3224	3138	3389					
Pre-marital sex not wrong at all	75%	74%	76%	79%	78%					
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3004	2884	3224	3138	2239					

Table A.3 Attitudes to pre-marital sex, by generation cohort, 1983-2022

Pre-marital sex not wrong at all	1900s	1910s	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
1983	18%	13%	28%	36%	53%	63%	66%				
<i>Unweighted base</i>	112	241	269	281	346	317	177				
1993		17%	20%	35%	53%	69%	70%	77%			
<i>Unweighted base</i>		117	191	186	245	287	312	110			
2003			24%	42%	60%	69%	75%	75%	68%		
<i>Unweighted base</i>			210	267	342	349	449	353	123		
2013				40%	57%	68%	74%	73%	72%	76%	68%
<i>Unweighted base</i>				113	160	174	196	194	139	69	
2022					58%	78%	80%	83%	78%	85%	88%
<i>Unweighted base</i>					213	403	386	316	404	360	85

Table A.4 Attitudes to homosexual sex, by generation cohort, 1983-2022

Same sex relationships not wrong at all	1900s	1910s	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
1983	0%	3%	17%	17%	25%	27%	18%				
<i>Unweighted base</i>	112	241	269	281	346	317	177				
1993		4%	7%	10%	16%	22%	26%	31%			
<i>Unweighted base</i>		117	191	186	245	287	312	110			
2003			10%	13%	32%	36%	48%	51%	53%		
<i>Unweighted base</i>			210	267	342	349	449	353	123		
2013				23%	42%	55%	58%	66%	71%	76%	
<i>Unweighted base</i>				113	160	174	196	194	139	69	
2022					46%	57%	73%	73%	69%	80%	71%
<i>Unweighted base</i>					313	614	625	508	601	521	123

Table A.5 Support for a woman having an abortion in different scenarios, 1983-2022

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1989	1990	1994	1995	1998
Woman decides on her own she does not wish to have a child	37%	29%	49%	44%	54%	49%	56%	54%	60%	54%
Woman not married and does not wish to marry the man	42%	32%	54%	51%	56%	57%	56%	54%	55%	51%
Couple cannot afford any more children	47%	37%	58%	51%	58%	57%	62%	61%	59%	56%
Strong chance of the baby having a serious health condition	82%	82%	86%	85%	89%	87%	88%	85%	82%	84%
Woman's health seriously endangered by the pregnancy	87%	92%	91%	92%	94%	92%	93%	92%	90%	92%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1761	1675	1530	1416	1281	1307	1197	984	1054	877
	2004	2005	2007	2008	2012	2016	2022			
Woman decides on her own she does not wish to have a child	56%	60%	60%	60%	62%	70%	76%			
Woman not married and does not wish to marry the man	52%	n/a	n/a	n/a	56%	n/a	68%			
Couple cannot afford any more children	53%	51%	48%	52%	64%	65%	72%			
Strong chance of the baby having a serious health condition	81%	n/a	n/a	n/a	81%	n/a	89%			
Woman's health seriously endangered by the pregnancy	91%	91%	85%	90%	91%	93%	95%			
<i>Unweighted base</i>	884	2645	906	2004	950	1619	2202			

Table A.6 Support for a woman being allowed to have an abortion if she does not wish to marry the man, by generation cohort, 1984-2022

Woman not married and does not wish to marry the man	1900s	1910s	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
1984	22%	24%	24%	30%	34%	32%	30%				
<i>Unweighted base</i>	73	187	275	224	276	299	204				
1994		54%	53%	58%	46%	55%	59%	52%			
<i>Unweighted base</i>		60	133	134	160	174	238	78			
2004			43%	45%	44%	60%	64%	67%	61%		
<i>Unweighted base</i>			70	122	145	163	171	144	55		
2012				57%	48%	65%	69%	65%	65%		
<i>Unweighted base</i>				97	187	155	164	154	114		
2022					70%	76%	78%	76%	76%	81%	70%
<i>Unweighted base</i>					205	396	432	318	393	331	76

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