

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.



How 20 Years of Same-Sex Marriage Changed America

After 'dire predictions,' the effects have been largely positive, a new study finds

David Wilson and Rob Compton, in glasses, in Provincetown, Mass. The couple wed 20 years ago in one of America's first state-sanctioned marriages.
KAYANA SZYMCAK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By [Molly Ball](#)

May 13, 2024 5:00 am ET

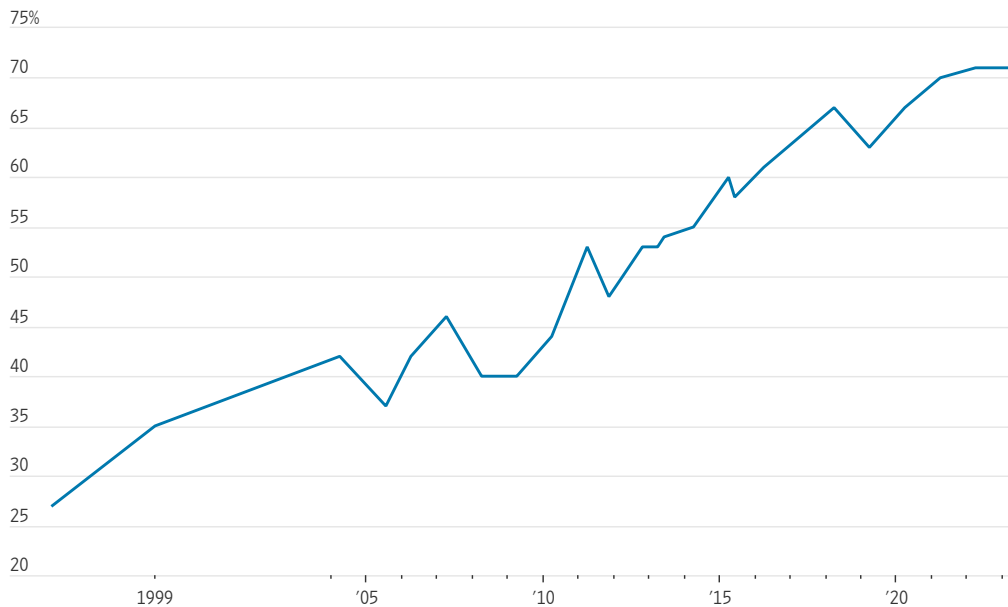
Twenty years ago this week, David Wilson and Rob Compton entered into a marriage that some believed would bring on the apocalypse. These days, they are happily retired and spend their time volunteering and visiting with their grandchildren.

When America's first state-sanctioned same-sex marriages [took place in Massachusetts](#) on May 17, 2004, Wilson and Compton's among them, a furious political controversy swirled. "The House and Senate, the governor, the president, the pope, the Black church I grew up in—everyone was against us, and it was very unnerving," Wilson, 80, recalled in a recent interview.

Opponents warned that the consequences would be dire. Then-Gov. Mitt Romney compared the court ruling that enabled it to the 1857 Dred Scott case that denied citizenship to Black people. Both presidential candidates, Democrat John Kerry and Republican President George W. Bush, came out [against it](#). Catholic bishops

called it “a national tragedy.” Sure to follow, they warned, was the ruination of the institution of marriage, the American family and potentially society itself.

Should marriages between same-sex couples be recognized by the law as valid, with the same rights as traditional marriages? Percentage in favor.



Source: Gallup

Two decades later, what was once the white-hot center of political debate has receded to the background. Polls show [nearly three-quarters of Americans](#), including 49% of Republicans and a majority of regular churchgoers, support it. The Supreme Court made same-sex marriage [a nationwide right](#) in 2015, and Congress gave federal recognition to the practice on a broad bipartisan vote in 2022. One of the votes in favor: Sen. Mitt Romney, who said the Respect for Marriage Act “signals that Congress—and I—esteem and love all of our fellow Americans equally.”

The widespread public approval suggests most people don’t believe the horrors once forecast have resulted from same-sex marriage’s legalization, and now there is evidence to prove it. A comprehensive new research report by the Rand organization finds that the consequences of two decades of legal same-sex marriage have been broadly positive for gay and straight Americans alike.

The researchers, who surveyed the existing literature and conducted their own analysis, could find no negative effects on straight couples’ rates of marriage, divorce or cohabitation as states legalized same-sex marriage. In fact, the effect on different-sex marriages was slightly positive. Meanwhile, same-sex couples saw a range of improved outcomes, such as greater health and financial security. “Overall, the fears of opponents of same-sex marriage simply have not come to pass,” said the study’s co-author, Benjamin R. Karney, a Rand researcher and UCLA psychology professor.

Today, many younger people might not even know their elders once had to fight for same-sex marriage, said Compton, 75, a retired Delta Dental executive. “Everybody takes it for granted,” he said. “It’s almost a nonissue. For kids 20 or younger, they’ve never known anything else.”



Compton, with Wilson, says that many people take same-sex marriage for granted now. PHOTO: KAYANA SZYMCAK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Wilson and Compton embraced the Rev. Kim Crawford Harvie after she signed the couple's marriage certificate after a Boston ceremony on May 17, 2004. PHOTO: JOHN WILCOX/BOSTON HERALD/GETTY IMAGES

A gradual transformation

The 20-year anniversary has led those involved in the fight for what they came to call “marriage equality” to reflect on a political and personal milestone. Evan Wolfson, founder of the advocacy group Freedom to Marry, believes those first Massachusetts marriages catalyzed a gradual transformation in Americans’ attitudes.

As same-sex married families became part of more communities, what was previously an abstract debate became real and relatable. “Once gay people were in the marriage club, we could talk about our love in the common language so many people use, and momentum accelerated,” he said. “Fair-minded people began to look at this in human terms.”

More than one million same-sex couples have now been married, and the Rand researchers found that they have reaped the benefits of marriage that have long been well-documented for different-sex couples. In states that legalized same-sex marriage, LGBTQ people had higher levels of health-insurance coverage and lower rates of sexually transmitted infections and problematic substance use, according to the report. They also had higher earnings and rates of homeownership.

Jen and Dawn BarbouRoske of Iowa City, Iowa, experienced the drawbacks of not being able to marry. The women met playing softball in the 1990s and considered themselves “married in our hearts” for years before they could legally marry, Jen BarbouRoske said. They combined their last names, exchanged rings and had a ceremony—but when Jen was admitted to the emergency room during a visit to family in Texas, hospital workers wouldn’t let Dawn, the person most familiar with her medical conditions and history, past the front desk to see her.

Three months after the Iowa Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in 2009, the couple were legally married over rainbow cupcakes in a public park. Today they proudly display family photos with their daughters and dogs in the public school where they both work, Jen as a nurse, Dawn as a teacher. “We always knew we would be together, but marriage really brought validity to our family,” Dawn said. “Not that you have to be married, but in our society, a family with kids is usually married. That’s how we show commitment and love.”



Jen and Dawn BarbouRoske, seated with dark glasses, and their family. They considered themselves married for years before their 2009 wedding, lower left.
PHOTO: BARBOUROSKE FAMILY

The principal argument made by opponents of same-sex marriage wasn't that it wouldn't benefit gay people but that it would damage marriage for everyone else—that detaching the institution from the traditional notion of family would cheapen it and make it less appealing to opposite-sex couples. This argument, made in numerous judicial opinions and legal briefs arguing against same-sex marriage, was a key proposition the Rand researchers sought to examine, given that marriage rates have been declining overall for decades.

Because different states legalized marriage at different times—Massachusetts was followed by Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont and New Hampshire; 37 states had legalized same-sex marriage by the time the Supreme Court made it the law of the land with the 2015 Obergefell decision—the researchers could compare marriage rates across states while controlling for other factors. They didn't find any evidence that straight couples' rates of cohabitation or divorce increased. Rather, they found that legal same-sex marriage was associated with increases in marriage that couldn't be explained by same-sex marriages alone. Opposite-sex marriages also increased as a result.

Rand economist Melanie A. Zaber, a co-author of the report, speculated that this effect could have resulted from the increased attention to the benefits of marriage created by the political debate over it. "It turns out if you spend a lot of time discussing and debating the benefits of marriage in the media, that increases the salience among the broader public," Zaber said.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What has the legalization of same-sex marriage meant to you or people in your community? Join the conversation below.

Eric Alva and Danny Ingram met in 2010, when the two military veterans were both lobbying Congress to repeal “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” the Clinton-era policy that barred openly gay people from serving in the military. “We’re a mixed marriage—he’s a Marine, I’m Army,” Ingram

jokes. Getting married allowed them to qualify for a Veterans Affairs loan for their house in San Antonio, where they throw an annual Pride-themed pool party and invite the neighbors to bring their children over.

Putting his ring on in the morning still makes Alva smile, and when he corrects strangers who ask about his wife—“Actually, I have a husband”—they rarely bat an eye. “We fought to defend everyone’s rights, and now we’re honestly living the American dream,” said Alva, who lost his left leg when he stepped on a land mine in Iraq.



Danny Ingram and Eric Alva, in blue tie, were married in 2017, left, after the two veterans met in 2010 while lobbying Congress to repeal ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.’ They now live in San Antonio with their dog, Sandy. PHOTO: ERIC ALVA AND DANNY INGRAM

Brad Wilcox, a sociologist who directs the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia and wasn’t involved with the Rand report, says he wasn’t surprised that gay couples have benefited from marriage. But he points out that many questions about the long-term effects remain. Only about 1.3% of married couples are same-sex, indicating that LGBTQ people aren’t marrying at a rate commensurate with their share of the population. (About 8% of Americans [identify as LGBTQ](#), according to Gallup.) With marriage rates continuing to decline overall, the institution has only become more politically polarized, and questions remain about the effects on children of being raised in same-sex

families. “It’s still too early to tell the effect on the broader culture of marriage,” Wilcox said.

Ralph Reed, the veteran conservative strategist and chairman of the Faith and Freedom Coalition, argues that Republicans should continue to fight for the idea of the traditional family that their evangelical base believes in and against the “judicial overreach” of the Obergefell decision. “I don’t think it turned out to be as epochal as either side hoped or feared, to be honest,” he said of same-sex marriage being legalized. “It was not as big a breakthrough for the gay community as they thought it would be, and on our side, it probably in hindsight didn’t do as much damage as we feared.”

Even as the public debate over same-sex marriage appears mostly settled, LGBTQ advocates face political battles on other fronts, including [transgender rights](#) and [school curricula](#).

How the tide turned

It’s difficult to think of a political issue that has seen as dramatic a shift in public opinion as marriage. But that doesn’t mean progress was swift or easy.

When Wolfson wrote a law-school paper on same-sex marriage at Harvard in 1983, the idea struck even many gay activists as ridiculous. Gay relationships were themselves illegal in many places until the Supreme Court struck down sodomy laws in 2003. Against the backdrop of the AIDS crisis, many advocates saw marriage as an impractical distraction or even rejected it as a heteronormative institution.

Wolfson persisted, helping argue a 1993 case before the Hawaii Supreme Court that found the state must grant same-sex marriages—and spurred a swift national backlash. Hawaii voters amended the state constitution to outlaw same-sex marriage, and President Clinton in 1996 signed the Defense of Marriage Act outlawing federal recognition of same-sex marriage. Opposition to same-sex marriage was bipartisan: The act passed the House 342-67 and the Senate 85-14. Just 27% of Americans believed same-sex marriage should be legal at the time, according to Gallup.



In 2004, supporters and opponents of gay marriage gathered outside the Massachusetts State House in Boston. STEVEN SENNE/ASSOCIATED PRESS; CHITOSE SUZUKI/ASSOCIATED PRESS; MICHAEL SPRINGER/GETTY IMAGES

In 2004, the same year the first marriages were performed in Massachusetts, 11 states approved ballot initiatives banning same-sex marriage. Many Democrats saw the referendums as a ploy by the Bush campaign to turn out conservative and religious voters and blamed them for Kerry's defeat in that year's presidential election. Advocates were further demoralized when, in 2008, California also voted to ban same-sex marriage.

"There was a lot of pressure on us to stop and pivot to civil unions," recalled Marc Solomon, who worked on the marriage fight in Massachusetts and nationally as Freedom to Marry's campaign director. "The thing that was so clear to me was that seeing is believing. Our opponents had all these dire predictions, but once people could actually get married, all people saw was just a huge amount of love."

[The tide began to turn](#) in 2012. That year, President Obama—[following the lead](#) of then-Vice President [Joe Biden](#)—announced he had "evolved" from his previous opposition, and four states—Maine, Maryland, Minnesota and Washington—took the side of same-sex marriage in ballot referendums for the first time. The victories were partly because of a crucial change in messaging. While earlier same-sex marriage campaigns had emphasized a dry, legalistic argument about the civil rights and benefits that marriage confers, in 2012 activists pivoted to accentuating love, commitment and universal family values. This change appealed to people's emotions and helped campaigners reach religious people and conservatives.

"As a lifelong Republican, I've always seen this as fundamentally an issue about freedom and individual liberty as well as about strengthening the institution of marriage," said James Dozier, chairman of Centerline Liberties, a right-leaning consulting firm that commissioned and funded the Rand report. Echoes of the strategy can be seen in [today's abortion-rights debate](#), where advocates have embraced a message of "reproductive freedom" and patriotic themes.



Rick Olson, far left, and Jay Timmons at their wedding in 2008 and with their family during a recent trip to Chicago.

JAY TIMMONS AND RICK OLSON (2)

Jay Timmons, the president and chief executive of the National Association of Manufacturers, a powerful Washington trade association, was a Republican operative in charge of the party's Senate campaign committee when he was outed against his will by liberal activists in 2004. He and his now-husband were married when it was briefly legal in California in 2008. In 2015 they began a protracted and expensive court battle when an idiosyncratic right-wing judge in Wisconsin barred them from bringing home their third child, a son born through surrogacy.

Working his connections in Virginia politics, Timmons, 62, helped get the state legislature to pass "Jacob's Law" to prevent others from enduring similar situations, and he was involved in [the Methodist Church's move last week](#) to recognize same-sex marriages and allow gay clergy. "We're the only two-dad family at the elementary school, and we have the same joys and challenges every other family has," Timmons said.

Write to Molly Ball at molly.ball@wsj.com