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Is Opposition to Same-Sex Parenting the Mirror Image of Support? Evidence from 26 European Countries

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ABSTRACT

There is a vast literature on how various socio-demographic characteristics shape attitudes toward the rights of gays, lesbians, and same-sex couples. Most studies assume that support for and opposition to these rights are the endpoints of a single scale on which variables have a symmetric effect. Our paper challenges this assumption and examines whether the most commonly used variables that typically predict attitudes toward homosexuality have different effects on the support for and the opposition to same-sex adoption rights and parenting skills. We propose an analytical strategy for examining asymmetric effects using standard survey data. Using data from 26 countries from the European Value Survey and the European Social Survey we find consistent evidence that the effects of gender, birth cohort, religiosity and political orientation are asymmetric. These results suggest that scholars should consider different theoretical explanations for understanding the support for and the opposition to the rights of gays, lesbians and same-sex couples. This study makes a significant contribution to the existing literature by introducing a methodological innovation and presenting new findings on European attitudes toward same-sex couples' adoption rights and parenting skills.

KEYWORDS

Attitudes; same-sex parenting; asymmetrical effects; European social survey; European value studies; adoption rights; parenting skills

Introduction

There is a vast literature on how various micro- and macro-level characteristics shape the attitudes toward gays, lesbians and same-sex couples. The most prevalent determinants of attitudes include individual-level characteristics such as gender, age, education, religiosity political orientation, and family status (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Becker & Todd, 2013; Cheng et al., 2023; Montero, 2014). Previous studies have produced consistent evidence on how these characteristics shape individuals' attitudes toward homosexuality and the rights of same-sex couples. Prior research has also addressed the question how attitudes toward homosexuality are shaped by the broader social context

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including economic development (van de Rozenberg & Scheepers, 2022; Whitworth & Moretti, 2023), welfare regime (Whitworth & Moretti, 2023), gender inequality (Takács et al., 2016), and the presence of laws and policies guaranteeing rights for lesbians and gays (Dotti Sani & Quaranta, 2020).

Previous studies drawing on survey data are similar not only in terms of empirical findings and substantive conclusions, but also in terms of an important methodological assumption that opposition to and support for homosexual rights are the mirror images of each other (Spierings, 2018). The linear and logistic regression models that are employed in the empirical studies are symmetric in the sense that negative and positive responses define the opposite ends of the same scale (bipolarity) and the increase in the latent attitude due to a unit-increase in a given explanatory variable is the opposite of the decrease in the latent attitude due to the unit-decrease in the same variable.

The idea that support and opposition are not mirror images of each other but are different latent variables is not new. Positive and negative evaluative processes are independent of each other and are rooted in different predispositions (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994; Cacioppo et al., 1997). Previous research focused on the conceptualization and empirical study of attitudinal ambivalence (Craig et al., 2005; Kaplan, 1972). The ambivalence of attitudes toward homosexuality is documented in qualitative studies focusing on individuals who are simultaneously exposed to various religious and liberal influences (Johnston et al., 2024; Moon, 2014; Sumerau et al., 2018). Studies of religious individuals show that respondents frequently draw simultaneously on competing moral frameworks, such as religious teachings, personal relationships with LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer) people, and broader principles of equality, producing positions that combine elements of both acceptance and disapproval rather than fitting neatly into either category (Johnston et al., 2024). Similarly, qualitative studies suggest that support for same-sex relationships may coexist with reservations about specific rights or family forms, while opposition may be expressed alongside empathy, respect, or recognition of equal human dignity (Durand, 2025; Webb et al., 2017). Rather than representing opposite poles of a single underlying attitude, these findings indicate that support and opposition are often constructed through different moral logics, social experiences, and interpretative frameworks (Hart-Brinson, 2016; Sumerau et al., 2018). Consequently, the determinants that foster supportive attitudes need not simply correspond to the absence of those that generate opposition.

This argument is reinforced by studies examining the social meanings of acceptance. Tissot (2023), for example, argues that expressions of gay-friendliness may function as markers of social distinction and moral superiority among privileged groups, while simultaneously reproducing symbolic boundaries and persistent inequalities. Such findings suggest that positive attitudes toward homosexuality are not merely the inverse of prejudice but

may emerge from distinct social processes and serve different social functions. This perspective further supports the view that support for and opposition to same-sex rights should be conceptualized as analytically distinct rather than opposite ends of a single attitudinal continuum.

The symmetry assumption is also problematic when one wishes to test the broad hypothesis that economic development and educational expansion are the main drivers of increasing gender equality, while religion and traditional authorities are barriers to this development (Spierings, 2018). The use of the “driver” and “barrier” terms indicate that different mechanisms account for the respective support of and opposition to gender equality: increasing (or decreasing) support is exclusively due to economic development (or collapse), while decreasing (or increasing) opposition is due to the decline (or rise) of traditional authorities only. However, under the assumption of symmetry, economic development is expected to increase not only the support for homosexual rights but also to reduce the opposition to those rights, a prediction which does not seem to be present in the theoretical idea. The assumption that positive and negative evaluative processes are independent of each other (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994; Cacioppo et al., 1997) is a straightforward theoretical framework for separating “drivers” from “barriers.”

Attitudes toward same-sex parenting constitute a particularly suitable case for examining asymmetric evaluative processes. Beyond its methodological contribution, the present study addresses a topic of growing social relevance, as debates over the rights of same-sex couples have become increasingly salient in the context of the recent backlash against gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights, particularly within democracies where these protections were previously established. At the same time, same-sex rights provide an especially appropriate empirical case because previous qualitative research has already suggested that support and opposition appear to be rooted in different moral frameworks and evaluative processes, while quantitative survey research has largely continued to rely on the assumption of symmetry.

The present article seeks to systematically examine the possibility that socio-demographic variables identified by previous studies might have different effects on the positive and negative attitudes toward same-sex parenting. Our work builds on, and substantially extends, the idea that support for and opposition to the rights of same-sex couples may differ (Spierings, 2018). Drawing on the idea that positive and negative evaluative processes are different (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994; Cacioppo et al., 1997), we propose a statistical model for the systematic study of asymmetries of effects. Our analytical approach targets researchers who wish to use available survey data in which attitudes are elicited using the conventional semantic differential instead of the split semantic differential (Craig et al., 2005; Kaplan, 1972). We empirically examine the impact of socio-demographic characteristics on the

attitudes toward same-sex parenting using data from the European Value Study and the European Social Survey. Our analyses focus on socio-demographic variables that appear in most of the empirical studies that have drawn on nationally representative surveys or comparative survey projects.

Literature review

Our literature review draws on publications we have found by systematically searching the Scopus, the Web of Science and the Google Scholar databases. We have searched for publications that appeared between 2006 and 2025 within the disciplinary fields of sociology and psychology and examined social attitudes toward same-sex adoption and parenting issues using regression methods and representative national or international survey data. We started our search from 2006, the year of introducing the first Eurobarometer variables measuring the agreement levels with statements about allowing “homosexual marriages” and the adoption of children “for homosexual couples throughout Europe” (European Commission, 2006). Based on these criteria, we found 20 studies that used nationally representative survey data for their quantitative analyses. Regarding the geographical scope of the studies, 12 analyzed data from the US, two from Norway, one from Mexico, and five articles compared several European countries on the basis of European Social Survey (ESS) or European Values Study (EVS) datasets. Some studies used combined measurements such as assessing attitudes not only toward adoption by same-sex couples but also toward same-sex marriage (for example, Frame, 2021; Perry & Whitehead, 2016), and including items on general acceptance of gays and lesbians (Dotti Sani & Quaranta, 2020) as well as on feeling ashamed if a close family member would be gay or lesbian (Whitworth & Moretti, 2023). However, the available literature regarding a direct comparison of attitudes toward adoption by same-sex couples with attitudes toward same-sex parenting skills is sparse.

In previous studies the most commonly used individual-level predictors of the attitudes toward homosexuality are gender, age/birth cohort, education, family status, religiosity and political orientation. There is ample evidence that gender serves as a predictive factor both for general attitudes toward gays and lesbians, and for specific ones related to same-sex parenting. Men’s stronger opposition to homosexuality is a reaction toward the violation of “proper masculinity” and helps distancing oneself from the stigmatized homosexual status of one’s same gender (Herek, 2000, 2002). This theory is supported by the findings of several studies we have examined, demonstrating that in comparison to men, women exhibit comparatively lower levels of dismissal and greater levels of supportiveness toward homosexuality-related issues (Becker & Todd, 2013; Hanson et al., 2022; Hollekim & Anderssen, 2022; Montero, 2014).

The inclusion of birth cohort is often justified with reference to Inglehart (1977, 1990) theory of value change positing that the degree of economic security during formative years contributes to the adaptation of post-materialistic values and reduces the psychological costs of deviating from traditional norms. There is ample evidence that older cohorts show greater opposition in their attitudes toward gays and lesbians (Montero, 2014; van de Rozenberg & Scheepers, 2022). This theory of value change, combined with the age-stability hypothesis (Alwin & Krosnick, 1991), which posits that personalities and behaviors tend to become stable and difficult to change after the impressionable years, implies age-related differentials: older individuals often demonstrating a disposition toward dismissiveness, while younger generations typically expressing higher levels of acceptance of homosexuality (see, for example: Cheng et al., 2023; Frame, 2021; Hollekim et al., 2012).

Several studies have highlighted the multifaceted role of education in promoting tolerance of diversity, and how education develops individuals' cognitive skills, allowing them to critically evaluate information, such as arguments for the equal treatment of gays, lesbians and the rights of same-sex couples to adopt (see, for example: Miall & March, 2005; Ohlander et al., 2005). Across all examined studies incorporating respondents' educational attainment as a variable, a consistent finding emerged: individuals with higher levels of education demonstrated greater acceptance of homosexuality and rights for gays, lesbians and same-sex couples (Becker & Todd, 2013; Schwartz, 2010; van de Rozenberg & Scheepers, 2022).

Family status can also influence attitudes toward same-sex couples. Previous studies have indicated that married individuals exhibit a higher propensity for negative attitudes toward adoption by same-sex couples and/or their parenting skills (Becker & Todd, 2013; Cheng et al., 2023; Miall & March, 2005). Beyond marital status, the parental status of individuals can also significantly impact their attitudes toward same-sex parenting because, in some European societies, voluntary childlessness is often perceived as a breach of social norms (McCutcheon, 2020), leading childless individuals to be more empathetic or understanding of non-traditional family structures, including same-sex parenting. Indeed, childless people tend to exhibit greater acceptance of same-sex couples having children compared to those who are (already) parents (Hollekim & Anderssen, 2022; Hollekim et al., 2012; Miall & March, 2005).

The examined research literature further indicates that religiosity consistently stands out as a major predictor of opposition to homosexuality (see, for example: Montero, 2014; Schwartz, 2010; Whitehead, 2018). Religiosity might also have a macro-level contextual effect on acceptance of homosexuality as individuals living in more religious societies tend to have more conservative attitudes (Adamczyk & Liao, 2019; Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009).

Individuals' political orientation is one of the most robust predictors of attitudes toward marriage equality and/or adoption by same-sex couples (Engeli et al., 2013; Schwartz, 2010). Several studies have affirmed that individuals who align with right-wing conservative political ideologies tend to exhibit significantly lower levels of acceptance toward homosexuality and the rights of lesbians, gays and same-sex couples compared to those espousing liberal values (Becker & Todd, 2013; Montero, 2014; Schwartz, 2010; Takács et al., 2016). Political polarization and party identity can also contribute to the polarization of attitudes toward gay rights (Siegel, 2024).

The examined studies all employ logistic, linear or ordered regression, therefore assume—or at least do not question the assumption—that the attitudes toward gays, lesbians, and homosexuality are bipolar scales and the effects are symmetric. We are not aware of empirical studies that would separately examine the support for and the opposition to homosexuality using available survey data.

A rare exception is a European comparative study focusing on the question whether attitudinal opposition to gender equality and “homosexual lifestyles” show different or similar patterns than their support (Spierings, 2018, p. 175). The author wanted to challenge the “problematic theoretical symmetry assumption” prevalent in the current scholarship that leaves limited room to conceive that opposition can be either influenced by other factors than those influencing support, or it can be affected differently by the same factors (Spierings, 2018, p. 172). Regarding the opposition to homosexuality, the findings confirmed the author's expectation that “general support and (strong) opposition can develop differently” (Spierings, 2018, p. 190). In this study, support for gender equality was studied using linear regression of a scale ranging from full opposition to full support, while the study of opposition relied on a logistic regression analysis of full opposition (Spierings, 2018, p. 177). Unfortunately, this analytical strategy suffers from some problems. First, the linear and logistic regression models use the same scale ranging from strong opposition to strong support. Therefore, the study cannot answer the question whether positive and negative evaluations “develop differently.” Second, both linear and logistic regression models assume bipolar scales. It is not clear why the double application of symmetric models allows the study of possible asymmetries. Finally, the regression models are estimated separately, thus it is impossible to assess the statistical significance of the differences in estimated support and opposition effects. We will present a genuinely asymmetric regression method in [Analytical strategy](#).

To summarize, the findings regarding the effects of important individual-level variables, including gender, age/birth cohort, education, religiosity, and political orientation, are consistent, and the vast majority of quantitative studies are committed to the symmetry assumption that opposition is the mirror image of support. Studies that make an attempt to

separately examine the support for and the opposition to same-sex parenting are rare. Against this background, we address the following research question: To what extent do the effects of key socio-demographic characteristics on support for same-sex parenting differ from their effects on opposition?

Data and variables

Data and sample

We use data from the 5th round of the European Value Survey (EVS), conducted in 2017–18, and rounds 8–10 of the European Social Survey (ESS), conducted between 2016 and 2022. We selected European countries that participated in both surveys. Our sample covers twenty-six countries, including the two countries—Denmark and the Netherlands—that were forerunners of institutionalizing same-sex partnerships and marriages. The other countries are Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

Our analyses are restricted to members of the birth cohorts 1946–2005 and to those who are aged 18–70. After the listwise deletion of missing cases, our analysis sample includes 87,340 respondents from the ESS sample and 28,425 respondents from the EVS sample ($N = 115,765$). The composition of the sample is presented in the [Appendix \(Table A1\)](#).

Measurements

We use two dependent variables that measure attitudes toward same-sex parenting. The EVS introduced a new item in 2017 whether “*homosexual couples are as good parents as other couples*.” Since its introduction in the 8th round of ESS in 2016, all ESS rounds include the item whether “*gay male and lesbian couples should have the same rights to adopt children as straight couples*.” Both items capture specific dimensions of attitudes toward same-sex parenting. Although previous research has shown that they are correlated with broader measures of attitudes toward homosexuality (van Oosten, 2022), we do not treat them as interchangeable with general attitudes toward homosexuality. Rather, our analysis is explicitly restricted to attitudes toward same-sex parenting. Agreement levels with both the EVS and the ESS items are measured on five-point scales. In the present study, answers are recoded so that 5 indicates strong agreement (support) and 1 indicates strong disagreement (opposition).

Previous studies used birth cohort as a proxy for economic conditions that shape values and attitudes during formative years. In our regression analyses, we use birth cohort categories 1946–1955, 1956–1965, . . . , up to 1996–2005.

Educational level is captured using three categories: low (EISCED categories I-II in ESS, “lower secondary” and lower categories in EVS), upper secondary education (EISCED categories III-IV in ESS, “upper secondary,” “post-secondary non tertiary” in EVS) and tertiary education.

Family status is captured by two dummy variables: parenthood indicating the presence of children in the household, and marital status identifying those who live in marriage.

Religiosity and right-wing political orientation are important predictors of the opposition to same-sex parenting. We use three categories to measure religiosity: at least weekly attendance at religious services, a less frequent attendance at religious services (henceforth occasional religiosity), and no attendance at all. We use the responses to the left-right orientation items to construct a simple three-category political orientation variable: left, center and right. The EVS asks the question: *“In political matters, people talk of ‘the left’ and ‘the right.’ How would you place your views on this scale, generally speaking?”* A ten-point scale is used to record the answers (1 = left, . . . , 10 = right). The ESS has the following item: *“In politics people sometimes talk of ‘left’ and ‘right.’ Using this card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right.”* Left-wing and right-wing orientations are measured by using the four smallest and four largest response categories and the three intermediate categories are placed in the center category.

Analytical strategy

Many statistical models are available to study asymmetries in ordinal responses including the multinomial logistic regression model, the generalized ordered regression model, the adjacent category logistic regression model and the unconstrained continuation-ratio logistic regression model (Fu, 2002; A. Fullerton & Xu, 2016; Sobel, 1997; Williams, 2006). Previous studies of asymmetries in welfare attitudes employed the generalized ordered response model (A. S. Fullerton & Dixon, 2009, 2010). Our main concern with these models is that they are not explicitly built around the theoretical idea that different mechanisms underly positive and negative evaluations. Besides, the aforementioned models are difficult to interpret as the assessment of asymmetries requires the comparison of regression coefficients across many equations.

In this article, we propose an analytical strategy for examining asymmetric effects in attitudes using standard survey data. Our point of departure is the bivalent model of attitudes (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994), which posits that attitude objects trigger both negative and positive evaluative processes at the

same time. Both evaluations are shaped by the same covariates, but the effect of a specific covariate may have different impact on the negative and the positive evaluations (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994). These ideas can be represented using the following linear model:

$$\begin{aligned} V^- &= \alpha^- + \beta^- X + \varepsilon^- \\ V^+ &= \alpha^+ + \beta^+ X + \varepsilon^+. \end{aligned}$$

Linear and ordinal regression models of attitudes assume that the attitude underlying the observed responses is the difference between the positive and the negative evaluation. This assumption yields the statistical model

$$Y^* = V^+ - V^- = \alpha + \beta x + \varepsilon$$

Where Y^* denotes the latent variable that underlies the observed survey responses. This model is symmetric and does not permit the separate study of positive and negative evaluations.

Unfortunately, separate positive and negative evaluations are, to our best knowledge, not available in survey data; what is available is a survey item (or batteries of items) indicating the balance of positive and negative feelings. To study asymmetries using available survey data, we propose an alternative model of the form:

$$Y^* = \begin{cases} V^- = \alpha^- + \beta^- X, & \text{if } V^+ < V^- \\ V^+ = \alpha^+ + \beta^+ X, & \text{if } V^+ \geq V^-. \end{cases}$$

Note that the neutral responses contribute to both subscales, because neutral responses can equally be interpreted as indicators of weakly negative as well as weakly positive attitudes. We do not consider the split of the sample in terms of the responses and the double use of neutral responses as a problem because these practices also characterize existing statistical models including the conditional logistic regression model and the adjacent category logistic regression model.

This model suggests the following procedure to study asymmetries in attitudes. First, we construct two separate subscales to capture the positive and negative evaluations toward same-sex parenting. The opposition subscale includes the strong and moderate disagreements as well as the neutral response, while the support subscale includes the strong and moderate agreements as well as the neutral response. Let Y denote the full attitude scale measuring the strength of the (positive) attitude toward same-sex parenting (1 = strong disagreement, ..., 5 = strong agreement). The opposition and support subscales are defined as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} Y^- &= 3 - Y & \text{if } Y \leq 3 \\ Y^+ &= Y - 3 & \text{if } Y \geq 3. \end{aligned}$$

Table 1. Definition of the support and opposition subscales.

Full scale	Support subscale	Opposition subscale
1 (strongly disagree)	–	2
2 (disagree)	–	1
3 (neither agree nor disagree)	0	0
4 (agree)	1	–
5 (strongly agree)	2	–

Table 1 illustrates the relationship between the opposition and support subscales and the original scale. Strong disagreement is represented as strong opposition (high value on the negative subscale). On both subscales, zero values correspond to the neutral response “neither agree nor disagree” (the response coded with 3), and the neutral answers contribute to both subscales. The underlying assumption is that weak positive and weak negative evaluations equally yield neutral responses. Note that the use of non-extreme responses twice is a common feature of all partial models (A. Fullerton & Xu, 2016).

To study the net dependence of the support of and the opposition to same-sex rights on explanatory variables, we estimate the ordinal logistic regression models of opposition and support simultaneously. Simultaneous estimation permits not only the easy computation of the differences in regression coefficients between the opposition and the support equations but also the estimation of the full covariance matrix of the estimates, which, in turn, permits testing the hypothesis that support and opposition effects are identical (Wald test). Prior to estimation, we examined multicollinearity among the explanatory variables and found no problematic levels. Because the opposition subscale is a reversed subscale, the degree of asymmetry is indicated by the sum of the equation-specific regression coefficients. This sum is zero when a unit (partial) increase in the variable under study increases latent opposition and decreases latent support to the same degree—which is the case of perfect symmetry.

All regression models include dummies for countries so that estimates will reflect relationships within countries. This approach is preferred over multi-level modeling because the number of countries is small while the average number of individuals per country is large—a situation which is ideal for fixed effects modeling (Bryan & Jenkins, 2016). To respect the nested structure of the data (respondents are nested within countries), the standard errors are adjusted for clustering at country-level. We report weighted estimates, the weights being identical to the post-stratification weights available in both the EVS and ESS surveys. All statistical analyses were performed using the statistical software Stata, version 18. The simultaneous estimation of the ordered response model was performed with the help of the *gsem* command. We have also checked the robustness of the results via comparing the estimates with multinomial logistic regression estimates. The multinomial logistic regression

models study how the explanatory variables affect the odds of positive and negative responses compared to the neutral one. Overall, our results are robust and the detailed multinomial logistic regression results contribute to the understanding of the asymmetric patterns.

Results

Descriptives

Table 2 shows the means of the continuous variables and the percentage distribution of the levels of categorical variables. As for the dependent variables, the majority of respondents expressed supportive views (54.3% in the ESS sample, 48% in the EVS sample). Disagreement and strong disagreement are less frequent (31.3% in the ESS sample, 34.7% in the EVS sample). The share of neutral responses is below 20% in both samples.

Table 2. Means and percentage distribution of variables: full sample.

	ESS	EVS
N	87,340	28,425
Right to adopt children		
strongly disagree	17.1	.
disagree	14.2	.
neutral	14.5	.
agree	24.6	.
strongly agree	29.7	.
Homosexual couples being as good parents as heterosexuals		
strongly disagree	.	16.2
disagree	.	18.5
neutral	.	17.4
agree	.	26.6
strongly agree	.	21.4
Female	0.502	0.494
Cohort		
1946–1955	13.2	14.6
1956–1965	19.9	19.4
1966–1975	21.2	20.3
1976–1985	18.7	19.5
1986–1995	17.1	17.3
1996–2005	10.0	9.0
Education		
low	21.8	28.8
upper secondary	52.6	36.9
tertiary	25.6	34.4
Parenthood	0.638	0.646
Married	0.489	0.475
Religiosity		
never	42.0	44.0
rare attendance	47.0	44.2
weekly attendance	11.0	11.7
Political orientation		
left-wing	25.2	29.8
centre	53.6	43.0
right-wing	21.3	27.1

Notes: Figures for categorical variables are percentages. Other numbers are means. Weighted estimates using both sampling and population weights.

Figures A1 and A2 in the Appendix show the respective distribution of the support for and the opposition to same-sex adoption and parenting. Support is strong in the Scandinavian countries, while the former communist countries tend to exhibit opposition. Regarding the “*homosexual couples are as good parents as other couples*” (EVS) variable, the highest levels of support were expressed in Iceland (85%), Sweden (79%), Norway (74%), France (72%) and the Netherlands (72%), while the highest levels of opposition were recorded in Serbia (82%), North Macedonia (68%), Lithuania (72%), Russia (70%), and Bulgaria (61%). Regarding the “*gay male and lesbian couples should have the same rights to adopt children as straight couples*” (ESS) variable, the highest levels of support were expressed in Iceland (92%), the Netherlands (83%), Spain (81%) Sweden (77%), and Norway (74%), while the highest levels of opposition were recorded in North Macedonia (85%), Russia (82%), Lithuania (72%), Montenegro (60%), and Bulgaria (61%).

Regression analysis of the attitudes toward same-sex adoption rights

Table 3 presents the estimates of three ordinal logistic regression models of the attitudes toward same-sex adoption as well as the estimates of asymmetries in effects. Column (1) shows the estimates of an ordinal logistic regression model using the full attitude scale (including all responses). A more positive attitude toward same-sex adoption is exhibited by women, by the members of younger birth cohorts, by the educated and by those who lean toward the left. The support for same-sex adoption increases monotonically with birth cohort and education: the younger the birth cohort, and the higher the level of education, the stronger the support. In contrast, a more negative attitude toward adoption is exhibited by those who are parents, who are married, who are religious and those who lean toward the right.

Column 2 of Table 3 displays the estimates of the regression model of the support subscale. These estimates replicate the previous estimates with one exception: there is no evidence that right-wing political orientation decreases support for same-sex adoption. The multinomial regression analysis reveals that right-wing political orientation decreases strong agreement but does not seem to decrease agreement, compared to the neutral opinion (see Table A2 in the Appendix).

Column 3 of Table 3 presents the estimates of the regression model of the opposition subscale. Under the hypothesis of symmetry, the signs of the estimates would be the opposites of the signs of the full scale and the support subscale coefficients. While most of the estimates are consistent with the symmetry hypothesis, there are two important exceptions regarding the effects of religiosity and political orientation. First, there is no evidence that people who attend religious services occasionally oppose same-sex adoption more than those who never attend religious services. The multinomial regression

Table 3. Ordinal logistic regressions of the attitudes toward same-sex adoption of children.

	(1) Full scale	(2) Support	(3) Opposition	(4) Support+Opposition
Female	0.525*** (13.778)	0.499*** (14.530)	-0.208*** (7.053)	0.290*** (6.252)
Cohort				
1956–1965	0.277*** (7.782)	0.227*** (5.647)	-0.138*** (3.868)	0.088 (1.529)
1966–1975	0.436*** (8.912)	0.369*** (6.160)	-0.234*** (5.513)	0.134 (1.755)
1976–1985	0.586*** (11.134)	0.552*** (6.925)	-0.258*** (4.679)	0.294* (2.575)
1986–1995	0.783*** (10.101)	0.784*** (7.257)	-0.270*** (3.825)	0.514*** (3.327)
1996–2005	1.216*** (13.373)	1.144*** (9.747)	-0.505*** (5.458)	0.639*** (3.664)
Education				
upper secondary	0.207*** (5.972)	0.070* (2.056)	-0.225*** (4.761)	-0.154* (2.366)
tertiary	0.570*** (11.612)	0.383*** (8.267)	-0.409*** (9.104)	-0.026 (0.385)
Parenthood	-0.178*** (6.775)	-0.125*** (6.492)	0.140*** (4.022)	0.016 (0.376)
Married	-0.130*** (6.150)	-0.094*** (3.368)	0.052* (2.091)	-0.042 (1.019)
Religiosity				
rare attendance	-0.449*** (10.071)	-0.462*** (13.404)	0.089 (1.535)	-0.374*** (5.364)
weekly attendance	-1.227*** (9.926)	-0.847*** (10.227)	0.620*** (6.205)	-0.227* (2.144)
Political orientation				
left-wing	0.495*** (6.907)	0.635*** (14.516)	0.077 (1.128)	0.713*** (8.087)
right-wing	-0.311*** (3.947)	-0.074 (1.264)	0.320*** (4.153)	0.246** (3.100)
N of observations	87,340	57,116	44,521	
Pseudo R-squared	0.153	0.131	0.051	

*, $p < .05$, **, $p < .01$, ***, $p < .001$.

Weighted estimates of regression coefficients using sampling weights. Country fixed-effects are included but the estimates are not shown. Numbers in parentheses are absolute values of t statistics. Underlying standard errors are adjusted for clustering at the country level. The reference categories are: born in 1946–1955, lower level of education, no attendance of religious services, centrist political orientation.

analysis shows that although this weak form of religiosity is associated with disagreement, it does not seem to affect strong disagreement. Second, there is no evidence that left-leaning individuals are more against same-sex adoption than people with a centrist position, but there is evidence that right-leaning individuals do oppose same-sex adoption. Finding no association between left-wing orientation and opposition aligns with the results of the multinomial regression analysis: neither the strong nor the moderate level of disagreement is statistically associated with left-wing political orientation.

Column 4 of Table 3 presents evidence on asymmetries of support and opposition effects. The figures in this column are the sums of the support and opposition coefficients. Under the hypothesis of asymmetry, the sum of the two coefficients should significantly differ from zero. A positive sum indicates that the examined variable has a larger effect on support than on opposition,

while a negative sum indicates the opposite. We find several patterns of asymmetries. First, the difference in support between women and men is larger than the difference in opposition ($b = 0.290$, $p < 0.01$). Second, the difference between the strength of support and opposition increases as we move from older cohorts to younger ones (1976–1985 cohort: $b = 0.294$, $p < 0.05$; 1986–1995 cohort: $b = 0.514$, $p < 0.001$; 1996–2005 cohort: $b = 0.639$, $p < 0.001$). Third, the difference in opposition between those with upper secondary education and those with less education is larger than the difference in support ($b = -0.154$, $p < 0.05$). Fourth, religious people (who attend religious services) and nonreligious persons differ in terms of (lack of) support, rather than in terms of opposition (rare attendance at religious services: $b = -0.374$, $p < 0.001$; weekly attendance at religious services: $b = -0.227$, $p < 0.05$). Finally, political orientation has an asymmetric effect: the difference in support between left-leaning and politically centrist individuals is larger than the difference in opposition between them ($b = 0.713$, $p < 0.001$), while the difference in opposition between right-leaning and politically centrist individuals is larger than the difference in support between them ($b = 0.246$, $p < 0.01$).

Regression analysis of the attitudes toward same-sex parenting skills

Table 4 presents the estimates of three ordinal logistic regression models of the attitudes toward same-sex parenting as well as the estimates of asymmetries in effects. Again, column (1) displays the estimates of an ordinal logistic regression model using the full attitude scale. Similar to the results reported in the previous section, women are more supportive than men. As expected, members of younger cohorts are more supportive and less opposing with regard to same-sex parenting. The attitude toward same-sex parenting abilities is more positive among the highly educated, but more critical among parents and among married persons. Skepticism regarding the parenting skills of same-sex couples is stronger among religious people and right-leaning individuals.

Support for same-sex parenting (Column 2 of Table 4) exhibits a similar pattern, with one exception: there is no evidence that right-leaning individuals are less supportive than politically centrist individuals. The multinomial regression analysis (see Table A3 in the Appendix) shows that right-wing orientation is negatively associated with strong disagreement, but it does not seem to be negatively associated with moderate disagreement.

Column 3 of Table 4 presents evidence on the opposition to the idea that same-sex couples would be as good parents as other couples. These findings differ considerably from the previous ones. First, there is much less evidence that opposition depends on birth cohorts. Second, there is no evidence that parents and married persons oppose same-sex parenting more than childless and unmarried individuals. Third, there is no evidence that there is a difference in opposition between non-religious people and those who attend

Table 4. Ordinal logistic regressions of the attitudes toward same-sex parenting.

	(1) Full scale	(2) Support	(3) Opposition	(4) Support+Opposition
Female	0.762*** (17.793)	0.710*** (14.922)	−0.298*** (5.113)	0.413*** (4.296)
Cohort				
1956–1965	0.182*** (4.249)	0.238*** (5.453)	−0.023 (0.300)	0.215* (2.043)
1966–1975	0.313*** (5.727)	0.356*** (5.133)	−0.086 (1.087)	0.271* (2.219)
1976–1985	0.499*** (6.936)	0.516*** (5.475)	−0.215** (2.579)	0.302* (2.136)
1986–1995	0.688*** (7.362)	0.768*** (8.075)	−0.157 (1.223)	0.611*** (3.469)
1996–2005	0.880*** (7.029)	0.845*** (7.716)	−0.337* (2.154)	0.508** (2.589)
Education				
upper secondary	0.069 (1.006)	0.030 (0.548)	−0.064 (0.608)	−0.034 (0.265)
tertiary	0.319*** (4.335)	0.210*** (4.272)	−0.281* (2.470)	−0.071 (0.545)
Parenthood	−0.133** (3.139)	−0.138** (2.661)	0.081 (1.403)	−0.057 (0.645)
Married	−0.117*** (3.728)	−0.091* (2.218)	0.059 (1.132)	−0.032 (0.420)
Religiosity				
rare attendance	−0.364*** (8.151)	−0.347*** (7.923)	0.102 (1.897)	−0.245*** (3.714)
weekly attendance	−1.141*** (12.006)	−0.715*** (8.682)	0.690*** (7.103)	−0.025 (0.189)
Political orientation				
left-wing	0.375*** (8.675)	0.455*** (10.901)	0.065 (1.122)	0.519*** (7.155)
right-wing	−0.288*** (4.296)	−0.101 (1.805)	0.338*** (3.958)	0.237* (2.470)
N of observations	28,425	19,321	14,261	
Pseudo R-squared	0.148	0.112	0.074	

*, $p < .05$, **, $p < .01$, ***, $p < .001$.

Weighted estimates of regression coefficients using sampling weights. Country fixed-effects are included but the estimates are not shown. Numbers in parentheses are absolute values of t statistics. Underlying standard errors are adjusted for clustering at the country level. The reference categories are: born in 1946–1955, lower level of education, no attendance of religious services, centrist political orientation.

religious services occasionally. Finally, there is no evidence that left-leaning individuals are less opposing than the politically centrist. The results of the multinomial regression analysis are consistent with these findings.

Column 4 of Table 4 presents evidence about asymmetries of support and opposition effects. We can find four patterns of asymmetries. First, the difference in support between women and men is larger than the difference in opposition ($b = 0.413$, $p < 0.001$). Second, support is stronger than opposition as we move from older cohorts to younger ones. Third, people who attend religious services less frequently and nonreligious persons differ in terms of (lack of) support, rather than in terms of opposition ($b = -0.245$, $p < 0.001$). Finally, political orientation has an asymmetric effect: the difference in support between left-leaning and politically centrist individuals is larger than the difference in opposition between them ($b = 0.519$, $p < 0.001$), while the

difference in opposition between right-leaning and politically centrist individuals is larger than the difference in support between them ($b = 0.237$, $p < 0.05$).

Discussion

Most quantitative studies of attitudes toward homosexuality, gays, lesbians, and same-sex couples implicitly assume that the attitudes are bipolar scales and that the effect of explanatory variables are symmetric. This symmetry assumption also characterizes studies that document differences in effects across different conceptualizations of attitudes. For instance, attitudes toward parenting skills by same-sex couples tend to be more positive than attitudes toward adoption rights (Szalma & Takács, 2025; Takács & Szalma, 2013), and the attitudes toward homosexual persons may be more tolerant compared to the attitudes toward homosexuality (Glas & Spierings, 2021). We have found only a few attempts to empirically disentangle the study of support from that of opposition (Craig et al., 2005; Spierings, 2018; Steele & Helmuth, 2019).

The present research examines whether the variables influencing attitudes toward same-sex adoption and parenting issues are symmetric along the lines of acceptance and rejection. To address this question, we introduce a specific methodological approach that involves separate regression analyses of support and rejection subscales. Using this new methodology, we document asymmetric effects for factors including gender, birth cohort, infrequent attendance at religious services and political orientation.

Economic development and educational expansion are often portrayed as key drivers of increasing gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights, whereas religion and traditional authorities are portrayed as barriers to this development (Spierings, 2018). Our findings align with Inglehart (1977, 1990) theory of value change, which posits that economic security during formative years fosters post-materialist values, thereby reducing the psychological costs of deviating from traditional norms. This perspective highlights cohort differences, with younger generations, raised under more favorable economic conditions, more likely to exhibit more accepting attitudes toward homosexuality compared to older cohorts. Our finding of asymmetric cohort and religiosity effects contributes nuanced insights to this framework. First, there is unambiguous evidence that, everything else being constant, younger people express more supportive opinions and the difference between support and opposition is greater among younger people. If cohort effects underlie this pattern and younger cohorts are exposed to better economic conditions, then our findings suggest that economic development promotes support for same-sex rights. Economic development can be portrayed as a main driver of increasing support for same-sex rights, but a low level of economic development is not necessarily a barrier to this development.

A consistent finding across our analyses is that the difference in supporting same-sex rights between women and men is larger than the difference in opposition toward those rights. Given traditional gender role expectations, women, who are positioned as primary caregivers, may develop a supportive attitude toward same-sex parenting by fostering an emphasis on love and care within family life over adherence to conventional norms. In contrast, men may develop an opposition toward homosexuality-related issues, if they perceive them as a threat to male dominance. Our findings suggest that explanations of gender differences should systematically focus on identifying the different mechanisms that account for positive and negative evaluations among men and women.

Religiosity and right-wing political orientation are often portrayed as barriers to the acceptance of same-sex couples' rights, while left-wing political orientation is portrayed as a driver of support. We find consistent evidence that those who visit religious services occasionally are less supportive of same-sex rights than those who never visit religious services, but there is no statistically significant difference between these two groups in terms of opposition for same-sex rights. This finding suggests that religious attendance is associated with reduced support for same-sex rights without necessarily generating stronger opposition. A conventional model tells us that political orientation matters. Our asymmetric approach reveals a more differentiated pattern: left-wing orientation is primarily associated with stronger support, whereas right-wing orientation is primarily associated with stronger opposition. This finding supplements previous explanations of the polarization of attitudes toward same-sex couples' rights, which have focused on increasing political polarization itself (Siegel, 2024), without addressing the asymmetric nature of political effects.

Addressing the central question posed in the title, whether opposition is merely the mirror image of support, the presented findings indicate that opposition and support frequently function as asymmetrical counterparts. The proposed statistical model systematically examines these asymmetries, providing empirical evidence to support theoretical arguments that suggest support and opposition may represent distinct latent variables rather than being simple opposites.

Our findings also help to bridge the gap between recent qualitative and quantitative research on attitudes toward homosexuality. While qualitative studies have argued that support for and opposition to same-sex relationships are often grounded in different moral logics and social experiences rather than representing opposite ends of a single continuum (Durand, 2025; Hart-Brinson, 2016; Johnston et al., 2024; Sumerau et al., 2018; Tissot, 2023; Webb et al., 2017) quantitative research has rarely tested this proposition using large-scale survey data. By documenting systematic asymmetries in the

effects of key socio-demographic characteristics across 26 European countries, our analyses provide quantitative support for these qualitative insights.

Our findings have broader implications for both empirical and theoretical research too. The present findings can inspire not only further empirical studies but also theoretical work to explain asymmetrical effects. In the context of welfare attitudes, prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) was successfully used to explain why support for welfare expansion is not the mirror image of welfare retrenchment (Pierson, 1996). In the context of attitudes toward same-sex couples' rights, further development of theoretical concepts should leverage the idea that positive and negative evaluations are independent of each other (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994; Cacioppo et al., 1997), and the reduction in negative affects should not be equated with an increase in positive ones (Cacioppo et al., 2012).

Additionally, our findings have policy implications. For instance, the study highlights the role of gender equality in fostering environments that are more supportive of LGBTQ+ families. Policymakers may consider these insights, particularly in light of the increasing alignment between anti-LGBTQ+ rights rhetoric and anti-gender ideologies, which are gaining prominence in certain populist movements and governments in developed countries. However, further research is required to explore these dynamics in greater depth.

This study has several limitations. The most important one is the lack of separate survey items measuring the support for and the opposition to the relevant attitudes in the international survey data. Additional limitations concern measurement and variable coverage: parenthood is proxied by co-resident children, marital status reflects only current status, religiosity is measured only by service attendance rather than affiliation or tradition, and relevant variables such as opinions on migration identified in recent studies (for example, Szalma & Takács, 2025) were not included.

Our study focuses on individual-level variables and omits contextual factors such as economic development (van de Rozenberg & Scheepers, 2022; Whitworth & Moretti, 2023), welfare regime (Whitworth & Moretti, 2023), gender inequality (Takács et al., 2016), and the presence of laws and policies guaranteeing rights for lesbians and gays (Dotti Sani & Quaranta, 2020).

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Data availability statement

The European Value Study and the European Social Survey datasets are publicly available.

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