

# The 2014 Election in Aiken County: Same-Sex Marriage

A Public Service Report  
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All conclusions in this report are solely those of the author and do not represent any position or opinion of the University of South Carolina Aiken.

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In the last few years, public opinion on rights for those in the Lesbian-Bisexual-Gay-Transgender (LGBT) community, and in particular opinion on extending the right to marriage, has been changing at an unprecedented pace. For example, more than a decade after the “don’t ask don’t tell” compromise was made allowing gays to serve in the American military, but not openly, Congress and President Obama changed the law in late 2010. Pressure came from a series of successful lawsuits challenging the policy, gay rights pressure on President Obama, and changing public opinion on the matter. Subsequent policy changes began to extend full family benefits to same-sex spouses of members of the military.

The next targets for change were the prohibitions of and limitations on same-sex marriage in states and the national Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). DOMA defined marriage as between a man and a woman, thereby denying same-sex marital partners any federal benefits. It also explicitly specified that states did not have to recognize same-sex marriages in other states. Here again pressure came from legal challenges, rights groups, and shifting public opinion.

Until the 2012 presidential campaign, President Obama took a position he had since the beginning of his political career. He claimed to support gay rights, but not same-sex marriage because of his religious beliefs. However, on May 7, 2012, Vice President Joe Biden stated that he supported full marital rights for gays. Within a few days President Obama said that his thinking had evolved, and he now personally supported same-sex marriage.

Obama's "evolution" lagged behind shifts in public opinion that had already taken place. A number of polls were showing plurality and even majority support for same-sex marriage by the time that Obama announced his shift. Pew Center and Gallup tracked the shifts in opinion from 1996 until now, and showed that supporters of same-sex marriage moved ahead opponents in 2011. (See <http://www.pewresearch.org/data-trend/domestic-issues/attitudes-on-gay-marriage/> and <http://www.gallup.com/poll/169640/sex-marriage-support-reaches-new-high.aspx>.) By 2013 and 2014 clear majorities were expressing support for same-sex marriage.

Obama's new position on same-sex marriage may have helped him in his 2012 reelection campaign. What had been a wedge issue helping Republican candidates in previous elections became an issue that probably helped Democrat Obama in 2012. Those opposed to same-sex marriage were unlikely to have voted for Obama regardless of his public stance. But persuadable voters who were most likely to support same-sex marriage, especially the young and those in non-southern swing states, favored Obama on this issue. Moreover, his new position energized his liberal base. All this played a role in helping him to win a majority of the popular vote in 2012, nearly matching his 53% win in 2008, the first president to win majorities in two elections since Ronald Reagan.

In the last several years, the federal courts and then state courts began chipping away at restrictions. Following some successful challenges in lower federal courts, the Supreme Court in 2013 invalidated DOMA's definition of marriage that blocked federal benefits for same-sex marital partners as a violation of the Fifth Amendment guarantee

of liberty (*United States v. Windsor*). The Court also let stand a lower court decision that threw out California's ban on same-sex marriage (*Hollingsworth v. Perry*). State laws began to fall almost as fast as a stiff late autumn wind blows leaves off trees. (An animated map showing how rapidly changes happened after a long period of slow change can be seen at: <http://gregstoll.dyndns.org/marriagemap/>.)

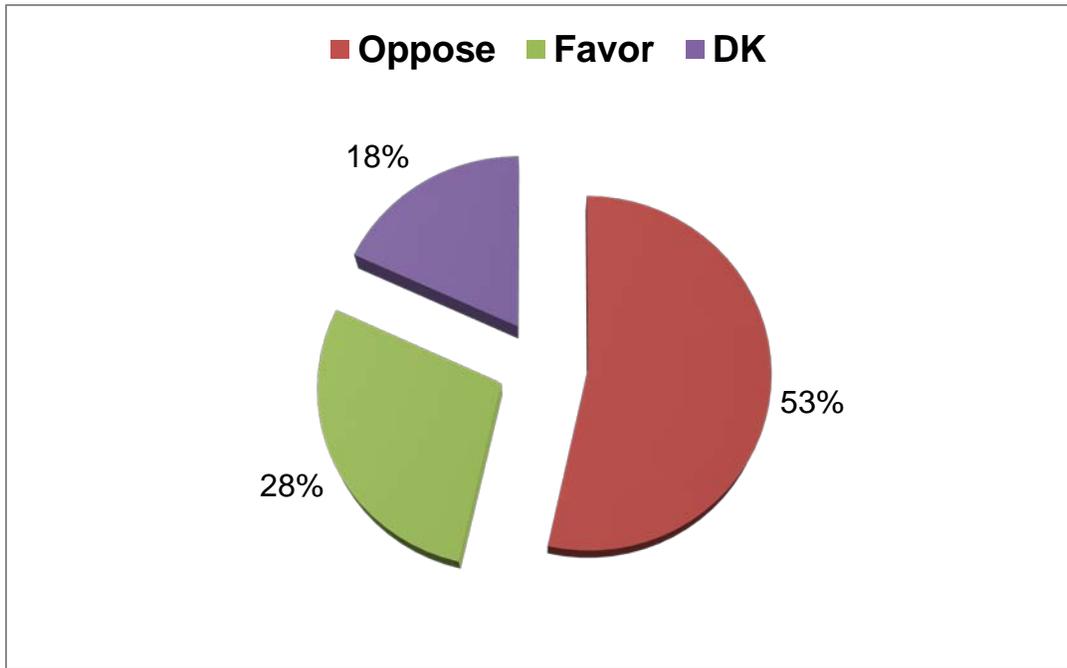
South Carolina's political leaders resisted these changes as long as possible. After the Fourth Federal Circuit Court of Appeals overturned state bans, which presumably would apply to all states in the Fourth Circuit, including South Carolina, South Carolina immediately filed an appeal to protect the state's 2006 constitutional ban. Then a U.S. District Court ruled that the Fourth Circuit ruling did indeed apply to South Carolina. South Carolina responded by asking the U.S. Supreme Court for a delay until they heard the appeal. The Supreme Court turned the request down. The first legal same-sex marriage in the state took place on in Charleston on November 19, 2014.

The purpose of this report is to explore opinion on same-sex marriage among Aiken County voters. We shall proceed in three ways. First, we look at overall opinion in 2014 and examine demographic, political, and attitudinal factors that help us understand support and opposition. Next we compare Aiken County opinion with national opinion. Finally, we explore change in Aiken County since 2006 determining how different factors affect change.

### **Opinions on Same-Sex Marriage and Explanatory Factors**

In the 2014 Aiken County Exit Poll, we directly asked voters about their views on gay marriage: "Do you favor or oppose allowing gays and lesbians to marry freely?" By almost two to one, a majority of voters opposed expanding marital rights to gays and lesbians. Only a little over a fourth of all voters supported expanding marital rights. The remaining slightly less than a fifth of voters expressed no opinion.

**Figure 1. Majority of Aiken County Voters Reject Same-Sex Marriage**



Demographic Factors. Who is most opposed and least opposed to same-sex marriage in Aiken County? Gender seemed to make a little difference, with women slightly more likely to be supportive than men (29% and 27% respectively), less likely to be opposed (51% and 57%), and more likely to say they did not know (21% and 16%). However, these differences were not statistically significant, so we should not draw any firm conclusion about gender differences.

Differences between whites and blacks were statistically significant, but more complicated. Blacks were both less likely than whites to support (21% and 29%) and less likely to oppose (49% and 55%) same-sex marriage. The greatest racial difference was that blacks were twice as likely as whites to say that they had no opinion on the issue (30% and 15%).

We might speculate that not expressing an opinion means something different on this particular issue than is usually the case on issues that few people think about very much. This particular issue certainly should have been familiar to anyone who paid

attention to anything that had been going on. It had been all over the news in the months leading up to the election, had been widely discussed in popular culture by celebrities, and had been all over social media. It should have been particularly salient for blacks because of the dramatic change in opinion by the first African-American president. President Obama's change caused difficult discussions in black churches across the nation led by ministers, most of whom had been strongly opposed same-sex marriage. In our survey nearly half of all blacks self-identified as religious fundamentalists compared to a third of all whites. Black fundamentalists were likely to have been participants in this discussion. We strongly suspect that among blacks and quite possibly among many whites, choosing to offer no opinion on this question was the result of transitioning—a kind of “half-way house” between opposition to and support of same-sex marriage.

Social science research consistently finds that social change usually happens first among the young and gradually filters up age groups through generational replacement. National polls have consistently shown that the young are far more supportive of same-sex marriage than older Americans. So we would hypothesize a similar relationship between age and positions on this issue among Aiken County voters. This proved to be the case. A slim plurality of voters under 36 years of age expressed support for same-sex marriage (42% to 41%) while almost two-thirds of voters over 64 years of age opposed same-sex marriage (64%).

Education provides tools for learning about social trends and is associated with a willingness to consider new ideas. We found a strong positive relationship between education and support for same-sex marriage. Among those with a high school education or less, people were more than seven times more likely to be opposed than to support same-sex marriage (73% and 10%). Support grew as education increased. Those with some college were opposed by three to one, and those with a four year college degree were almost evenly divided. Among those with post college graduate education, supporters outweighed opponents by about five to four (48% to 38%).

Over the years we have found that regional self-identification explains a variety of opinions because regional identification measures socialization into a region's culture.

We ask respondents whether they consider themselves to be “native southerners,” “converted southerners,” or “non-southerners.” People rarely have any problem in choosing one of these identities. The one label that some may find confusing is “converted southerners.” But we have found that this label is consistently chosen by those who were born elsewhere and have lived in the South a long time.

Regional self-identity was strongly related to opinion on same-sex marriage. A clear majority of non-southerners support same-sex marriage by a ratio of a little over five to three (54% to 32%). Only a little over one in ten were unwilling to offer an opinion. In stark contrast, native southerners opposed same sex marriage by slightly less than three to one (61% to 23%). Converted southerners were in between and roughly evenly divided, but leaning toward opposition. Caught between two sets of contrasting sets of cultural values, one in five converted southerners were unwilling or unable to offer an opinion, perhaps also in a “half-way house” between opposition and support.

Political Factors. Of all possible political identifications, party attachment has long been the single most powerful predictive variable in American elections. It has become even more significant as the two major parties have become more divided along ideological lines and as regions have strengthened the match between party and the ideology that dominates their culture. In South Carolina the Republicans have become the dominant party, and Aiken County is one of the more Republican counties in the state.

However, majority groups are particularly subject to splits. Since 2010 the Republican Party became factionalized along ideological lines with the Tea Party faction being the most conservative of the conservatives. For example, in 2014 almost 60% of all those voters who said they support the Tea Party considered themselves to be “strong conservatives.” Only a fourth of Non-Tea Party Republicans identified themselves as strong conservatives. As we have argued in other reports, Aiken County really has four significant partisan identities: Democrats (28% of all voters in 2014), Non-Tea Party independents (12%), Non-Tea Party Republicans (31%), and Tea Party Supporters (29%). Clearly the Tea Party is mostly a faction of the Republican Party because nearly nine in ten Tea Party supporters also identify as Republican, and the remaining either identify with some third party or as independents.

Support and opposition to same-sex marriage was very strongly related to these four major identities. Pluralities of Democrats and independents supported same-sex marriage. As we move to Non-Tea Party Republican, more than half said they opposed same-sex marriage (57%). Among Tea Party supporters, nearly four in five (78%) were opposed. We would also note that the Tea Party supporters were the least likely to have no opinion (9%)—little sign of any transitioning in this group.

We found a similar pattern in opposition and support in relation to ideology. As we move from the strongly liberal side through moderates to strongly conservative, opposition increased from one in five to more than four in five. Conversely, as we move from strong liberals to strong conservatives, support for same-sex marriage dropped from more than three in four to less than one in ten.

Because religious fundamentalists have been organized and very active in pushing their social agenda since the late 1970s, we will consider self-identified religious fundamentalists to be a political identity. As noted earlier in discussing President Obama's evolved thinking on same-sex marriage, opposition to same-sex marriage is often justified on religious grounds. Therefore, this identity should make a great deal of differences in opinion on the issue. It did. Among Aiken County voters, only one in ten self-identified religious fundamentalists supported same-sex marriage, while a narrow plurality of non-fundamentalists favored same-sex marriage.

Attitudinal Factors. We asked a series of questions about various groups that might be perceived as having "too much power." These groups have varied in the surveys over the years. One of the groups we asked about in the 2014 exit poll was "gays." Perceptions that "gays have too much power" may well be tied to the rapid social, political, and legal gains that the "LGBT" community had been making. Indeed, the percentage feeling "gays have too much power" increased from 32% in 2012 (the last time we asked voters this question) to 40% in 2014. These views were strongly tied to opposition of same-sex marriage. Almost nine in ten of those feeling that "gays have too much power" also opposed same-sex marriage, while those who did not feel that "gays have too much power" supported same-sex marriage by five to three.

Finally, we asked about the style of leadership voters preferred. We asked voters which they more preferred, leaders who stuck with party principles and refused to compromise, or leaders who were willing to work with and compromise with the other party. We might suspect that those opposing change in same-sex marital laws would prefer leaders who would refuse to compromise, while those who support same-sex marriage would be more comfortable with leaders who compromise. This proved to be the case. Those rejecting leaders who were willing to compromise rejected change in marriage laws by about five to one (74% to 14%). Those preferring leaders willing to compromise across party lines also rejected same-sex marriage, but by a much smaller margin of less than five to three (48% to 33%). Relatively more of those preferring compromise also chose to offer no opinion on the matter (19% to 12%), suggesting more change in the future.

**Table 1. Support for Same-Sex Marriage Varies by Groups of Voters in 2014**

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Support</b>	<b>Oppose</b>	<b>Support - Oppose</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>
<b>All Aiken County Voters</b>	28%	53%	-25	18%
<b>Gender: Men</b>	27%	57%	-30	16%
<b>Women</b>	29%	51%	-22	21%
<b>Ethnicity: White</b>	29%	55%	-26	15%
<b>Black</b>	21%	49%	-28	30%
<b>Age: Old (&gt;65)</b>	22%	64%	-43	15%
<b>Middle (36-65)</b>	29%	53%	-24	19%
<b>Young (&lt;36)</b>	42%	41%	+1	18%
<b>Education: HS or less</b>	10%	73%	-63	17%
<b>Some College</b>	21%	59%	-38	21%
<b>Col Degree</b>	41%	43%	-2	16%
<b>&gt; Col Degree</b>	48%	38%	+10	14%
<b>Income: &lt; \$75k</b>	24%	59%	-25	17%
<b>&gt; \$75k</b>	39%	44%	-5	18%
<b>Regional Identification:</b>				
<b>Non Southern</b>	54%	32%	+22	14%
<b>Converted Southern</b>	37%	43%	-5	21%
<b>Native Southern</b>	23%	61%	-38	16%
<b>Party/Tea Party:</b>				
<b>Democrats</b>	43%	25%	+18	32%
<b>independents</b>	47%	36%	+11	17%
<b>Non Tea Party Rep</b>	22%	57%	-35	21%
<b>Tea Party</b>	14%	78%	-64	9%
<b>Ideology:</b>				
<b>Strong Liberals</b>	77%	20%	+57	3%
<b>Liberals</b>	69%	19%	+50	12%
<b>Moderates</b>	40%	25%	+5	35%
<b>Conservatives</b>	25%	55%	-30	21%
<b>Strong Conservatives</b>	9%	83%	-74	9%
<b>Religion: Fundamentalist</b>	10%	79%	-69	12%
<b>Not Fundamentalist</b>	43%	38%	+5	19%
<b>Gay Power: too much</b>	4%	87%	-83	10%
<b>not too power</b>	48%	31%	+7	21%
<b>Leaders: No Compromise</b>	14%	74%	-60	12%
<b>Compromise</b>	33%	48%	-15	19%

## Comparison to National Opinion

The latest same-sex marriage opinions taken by six major national polling organizations in 2014 (*ABC/Washington Post*, *CBS/NY Times*, *McClatchy/Marist*, *Gallup*, *Bloomberg*, and the *Pew Center*) were remarkably consistent. Support ranged from 54% to 56% with an average of 55% favoring. Opposition ranged from 36% to 42% with an average of 38% opposing. Opinion among Aiken County voters is almost a mirror reflection of national opinion. Same-sex marriage is supported by roughly the same percentage nationally as it is opposed among Aiken County voters. The other notable difference was that Aiken County voters were three times more likely to offer no opinion on the matter. Perhaps these people are in that “half-way” house we discussed earlier between opposition and support.

**Table 2. Nation and Aiken County Voters Disagree on Same-Sex Marriage in 2014**

	<b>Support</b>	<b>Oppose</b>	<b>Support- Oppose</b>	<b>No Op.</b>
<b>Nation</b> (average of 6 polls)	55%	38%	+17	7%
<b>Aiken County Voters</b>	28%	53%	-25	18%

What makes Aiken County opinion so starkly different on this issue than national opinion? The answer is in the group differences we already examined. The proportion of Aiken County citizens in many of the groups that tend to be opposed to same-sex marriage is much larger than the proportion of the nation that are in those same groups: religious fundamentalists, strong Republicans, strong conservatives, Tea Party supporters, those with a southern regional identity, and those with lower education and lower income levels.

## Change in Opinion Since 2006

Back in 2006 South Carolina voters overwhelmingly passed a state constitutional amendment mandating that the state would only recognize marriages between “one man and one woman.” In our 2006 Aiken County exit poll we asked whether voters

voted “yes” or “no” on this proposal. Voters overwhelmingly voted for the amendment, 82% to 17% with only 1% reporting that they did not vote on that amendment. If we interpret a “yes” vote for the amendment as opposition to same-sex marriage and a “no” vote as support, we can at least roughly compare changes in the nation and among Aiken County voters over this eight year period.

Making this comparison is complicated because voters in 2006 could not vote that they had “no opinion,” except by choosing not to vote at all. Only 2.5% said that they did not vote on the amendment. On the other hand, voters in the 2014 exit poll voters had the option of choosing “no opinion” on the questionnaire. To correct for this difference, we excluded the “no opinion’s” in the 2014 survey and just compared those who did in a sense “vote” in our survey by offering an opinion with those who actually voted in the 2006 referendum.

**Table 3. National and Local Changes on Same-Sex Marriage, 2006 and 2014**

	<b>Support 2006 / 2014</b>	<b>Oppose 2006 / 2014</b>	<b>Sup%-Op% 2006 / 2014</b>
<b>Nation</b> (Pew Center)	33% / 54%	55% / 39%	-22 / +15
<b>Aiken County Voters</b>	18%* / 35%**	82%* / 65%**	-64 / -30

Notes: \* Those saying they did not vote are excluded. \*\*Those with no opinion are excluded.

Large changes in opinion have taken place both nationally and among Aiken County voters. Looking at national data from the Pew Center, support for same-sex marriage roughly doubled from 33% to 54% over eight years. Looking at Aiken County voters, support came even closer to doubling, increasing from 18% (those who opposed the 2006 amendment) to 35%. Looking at the gaps between support and opposition, nationally we see a 37 percentage point change in the gap, moving from opposition being 22 points higher than support, and then flipping to support being 15 points higher than the opposition. While no flip in opinion took place in Aiken County, the change in the gap was similar in size. It fell by 34 points, from opposition being ahead of support by a 64 point difference to opposition having a 30 point advantage.

Having polls for Aiken County voters in 2006 and 2014 allows us to examine changes in specific groups over this period of time. To keep the comparisons of groups relatively simple, we will just look at changes in support levels. Nationally, support rose

from 33% to 55%, a 22 percentage point increase. The increase in support among all Aiken County voters was not too far behind, an 18 point increase, from 18% supporting same-sex marriage in 2006 to 36% supporting it in 2014. Which groups in Aiken County changed the most and the least? We will begin with demographic groups, and then move to political identifications and then finally to religion.

**Table 4. Shifts in Support for Same-Sex Marriage Varies by Groups, 2006 & 2014**

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Support 2006*</b>	<b>Support 2014**</b>	<b>% Point Change</b>
<b>All Aiken County Voters</b>	18%	36%	+18
<b>Gender: Men</b>	16%	33%	+17
<b>Women</b>	20%	36%	+16
<b>Ethnicity: White</b>	16%	35%	+19
<b>Black</b>	26%	30%	+4
<b>Age: Old (&gt;65)</b>	13%	25%	+12
<b>Middle (36-65)</b>	19%	35%	+16
<b>Young (&lt;36)</b>	22%	51%	+29
<b>Education: HS or less</b>	15%	12%	-3
<b>Some College</b>	14%	26%	+12
<b>Col Degree</b>	17%	49%	+32
<b>&gt; Col Degree</b>	28%	56%	+28
<b>Income: &lt; \$75k</b>	17%	29%	+12
<b>&gt; \$75k</b>	21%	47%	+26
<b>Regional Identification:</b>			
<b>Non Southern</b>	25%	63%	+38
<b>Converted Southern</b>	23%	47%	+24
<b>Native Southern</b>	16%	28%	+12
<b>Party: Democrats</b>	33%	55%	+22
<b>Republicans</b>	8%	20%	+12
<b>Ideology: Liberals</b>	48%	79%	+31
<b>Moderates</b>	21%	53%	+32
<b>Conservatives</b>	7%	20%	+13
<b>Religion: Fundamentalist</b>	7%	11%	+4
<b>Not Fundamentalist</b>	28%	53%	+25

Notes: \* Those saying they did not vote are excluded. \*\*Those with no opinion are excluded.

Both men and women changed by about the same amounts, +17 and +16 percentage points respectively. However, whites changed much more than blacks, +19 and +4 points respectively. In 2006 black voters were relatively more supportive, but the shift in 2014 moved white voters ahead of black voters in support. This might be

because blacks are more likely to consider themselves as religious fundamentalists than whites. Religion may have made change more difficult for blacks, just as it seemed harder for President Obama than for Vice President Biden.

Age made the shift more difficult. The shift decreased as age went up. Among voters under 36, the shift was +29 percentage points. Among those between 36 and 65, the shift was +16 points. For those over 65, the shift was only +12. Change is easier for the young, who are more open to new cultural values as they go through their formative years.

Education increased the positive shift. The more education, the more likely one is to be exposed to different kinds of people and new ideas and ways of thinking. Those with only a high school degree or less were the only group that became less supportive, with a shift of -3 percentage points. But those with some years in college had a shift of +12. Those with a four year degree had a shift of +32. Those with post graduate years of education shifted +28. Regardless of the smaller shift, this most educated group were still more likely to support same-sex marriage in 2014 (56% to 49%) because they were far more supportive in 2006 (28% to 17%). College grads merely narrowed the gap.

Family income had a similar effect to education. Lower to middle income families (<\$75k a year) exhibited a +12 percentage point shift favoring same-sex marriage, while upper middle to upper income families (>\$75k) more than doubled that shift at +26.

Regional identification had the most dramatic effect. Those with a “non-southern” cultural identification had a +38 percentage point shift. Self-identified “converted southerners” shifted +24 points. Native southerners had only half that much shift at +12. Clearly the culture into which one is socialized made a great difference in accepting dramatically changed views on same-sex marriage.

Political identifications also made a fairly large difference in embracing change. Democrats had almost twice the shift of Republicans at +22 and +12 percentage points respectively. Ideology made more of a difference. All three groups shifted in the positive direction. Interestingly, liberals and moderates had essentially the same shift at +31 and +32 points respectively. Not surprisingly conservatives had the smallest shift,

but that it was a positive shift at all (+13 points), is somewhat surprising. Even those who identified themselves as “strong conservatives” shifted +6 (from 4% favoring same-sex marriage in 2004 to 10% favoring in 2014).

Finally, those with strong traditional religious beliefs should be those who are most resistant to change. This was almost the case. Only those with no more education than a high school degree were more resistant. Self-identified religious fundamentalists shifted +6 (from 7% to 11% favoring same-sex marriage) as compared to non-fundamentalists, who shifted +25 points.

Looking over all these shifts, they are broad-based and positive. All groups shifted toward acceptance of same-sex marriage with the lone exception of those with no more than a high school degree. The greatest change took place in those groups most likely to be exposed to new cultural ideas and those groups least likely to embrace traditional social values: non-southerners, the highly educated, ideological moderates and liberals, and the young.

While a clear majority of Aiken County voters still oppose same-sex marriage in 2014, a shift comparable to the national shift has taken place since 2006. That the majority is still opposed is mainly the result of the nearly unanimous opposition to same-sex marriage back in 2006. In 2014 Aiken County voters moved to roughly where the nation was in 2006.

**Figure 2. Percentage Shifts in Support of Same-Sex Marriage, 2006 to 2014**

