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Coming Out in America: Salience, Politics, and Cultural Change

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The last few decades witnessed a dramatic change in public opinion towards gay people. We show that this process was initiated by a sharp increase in the approval of same-sex relationships in 1992-'93, following the debate during the presidential election on whether gay people could serve openly in the military. We study the hypothesis that the greater salience of gay-related issues during this period initiated a process of cultural change and that the increase in approval of same-sex relationships was greater in places with more exposure to the gay population. Next, we explore whether the opposing positions taken by the Democratic and Republican parties is mirrored by the attitudes of individuals who identify with those parties. We show that the national discontinuity in opinion in 1992 hides heterogeneity at the level of party identification but that the opinion gap between Democrats and Republican already existed in the mid-eighties and did not become significantly larger as a result of the debate in 1992-'93.