

MARRIAGE AND CIVIL PARTNERSHIP (SCOTLAND) BILL

SUBMISSION FROM PROFESSOR JOHN CURTICE

1. This note attempts to summarise what is known about public attitudes towards same sex (also known as 'gay' and 'equal') marriage in Scotland. To do so it draws both upon the evidence of polls and surveys conducted solely within Scotland and those that have been conducted across Great Britain as a whole. The note should be read alongside a set of Powerpoint slides, also entitled 'Public Attitudes to Same Sex Marriage'. Reference here to a slide in that presentation is made thus: {n}.
2. The debate about same sex marriage, both in Scotland and in England and Wales, follows what might be regarded as a revolution in attitudes towards same sex relationships during the last 25 years {2}.
3. In 1983, the first year in which the annual British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey (Park et al., 2013) was conducted, as many as 62% said that 'sexual relations between two adults of the same sex' were either 'always' or 'mostly' wrong, while just 21% said that they were 'rarely' or 'not at all wrong'. This reading was taken shortly after the initial discovery of AIDS, which in the ensuing few years became particularly associated with male same sex relationships, and attitudes became even more critical such that by 1987 as many as 74% said they same sex relations were always or mostly wrong.
4. Since then, however, attitudes have gradually but consistently become more liberal. In 2003, shortly before the introduction of civil partnerships for same sex couples, the proportion who felt that same relations were rarely or not all wrong outnumbered those who felt that they were always or mostly wrong for the first time. Thereafter attitudes have become yet more liberal such that according to the most recent reading, taken in 2012, as many as 57% now say that same relations are rarely or not all wrong while just 28% feel that they are always or mostly wrong. The balance of opinion on the subject is now almost a mirror image of what it was thirty years ago. The change represents one of the most marked changes in attitudes to have been identified by BSA.
5. Exactly the same question has been asked on four occasions since the Scottish Social Attitudes survey was conducted in 1999 {3}. Across the decade covered by those four readings both the balance of opinion in any one year and the trend over time are very similar to the picture uncovered by BSA. Given that is the case and given too the relative paucity of evidence from polls and surveys conducted in Scotland alone, it would seem both reasonable and desirable to take cognisance of Britain wide evidence in making assessment of the state of public opinion in Scotland. It might be noted that a further example cited below of where a direct comparison can be made between the results

of a Britain-wide and a Scotland only survey supports this contention {12}.

6. Attitudes are strongly related to age, as illustrated by {4} which shows for each age group the proportion in the 2010 SSA that said that same sex relations were rarely or not at all wrong minus the proportion saying they were always or mostly wrong. Younger people are more liberal than older people, while the only group amongst whom the proportion who say that same sex relations are always or mostly wrong outnumbers the proportion who feel they are rarely or not all wrong are those aged 65 and over. The views of this group, who will have come of age at a time when male homosexual activity was still illegal throughout the UK, are markedly different from those of the remainder of the population. Further analysis of the long-term trend in attitudes across Britain as a whole reveals that one of the reasons why attitudes have become more liberal is that each new generation of adults has adopted a more liberal stance than its predecessor, albeit each individual generation has become more liberal over time too (Park and Rhead, 2013). This suggests that, in the absence of some unforeseen event that has a similar impact to the outbreak of AIDS in the 1980s, attitudes towards same relations can expect to continue to become yet more liberal for the foreseeable future.
7. SSA has asked its respondents on three occasions whether they agree or disagree that '*gay or lesbian couples should have the right to marry one another if they want to*' {5}. On the first occasion in 2002, 41% agreed and while 29% disagreed. Thereafter much as one would expect given the trend in attitudes towards same sex relations in general, support for the proposition increased such that by the most recent reading in 2010, as many as 61% agreed and only 19% disagreed (see also Ormston et al., 2011).
8. A similar pattern of response to SSA's most recent reading was obtained in an Ipsos MORI poll that was conducted in Scotland in June 2012 and which asked a not dissimilarly worded item on behalf of the Equality Network. This found that 64% agreed that '*same sex couples should have the right to get married*', while 26% disagreed.
9. Religious organisations have been prominent amongst those opposing the introduction of same sex marriage. And indeed as well as varying with age, attitudes towards same sex relationships also vary by adherence to a religion. Thus those who say they belong to a religion are less likely to agree that same sex couples should be able to marry than are those who do not {6}. Note though, that even amongst those who claim adherence to a religion, supporters of same sex marriage outnumber opponents.
10. Not everyone who claims adherence to a religion necessarily attends a religious service on a regular basis. A sharper picture of the relationship between religion and attitudes towards same sex marriage

is obtained by looking at reported frequency of attendance at a religious {7}. Opponents of same sex marriage do outnumber supporters amongst those who say they attend a religious service at least once a fortnight (though it might also be felt that regular worshippers still appear quite divided on the issue). Conversely, amongst those who attend a religious service only occasionally or never at all, supporters outnumber opponents by ratios of the order of 3 or 4 to 1.

11. If we look at the change in attitudes towards same sex relationships over the long term using BSA data, we can see that the views of those who are regular worshippers now appear more isolated than they did thirty years ago. In 1983 clear majorities felt that same sex relations were always or mostly wrong irrespective of their frequency of attendance at a religious service {8}. While a majority of those who are regular attenders (defined as attending a religious service at least once a fortnight) still adopt the same outlook, the same is no longer true of those who are occasional attenders or who do not attend a religious service at all. Thus whereas in 1983 there was just a 12 point difference between regular attenders and non-attenders in the proportion who felt that same sex relations are always or mostly wrong, now the equivalent gap is 38 points. Note, however, that even amongst those who are regular attenders attitudes are somewhat more liberal now than they were thirty years ago.
12. Just over one in eight people in Scotland now attend a religious service on a regular basis, down from the one in five who did so as recently as 1999. Nearly three-quarters of Scots now claim never to attend at all. As a result, whereas once the level of religious observance was higher in Scotland than in England & Wales, this now no longer appears to be the case. (According to the 2012 BSA, 12% of people in England & Wales are regular attenders, while 71% are non-attenders.)
13. Answers to survey questions can often depend on how they are worded. It is thus inadvisable to rely on the evidence of a single question, however expertly it might be thought to have been crafted. We might note in particular that the SSA question on same sex marriage does not explicitly distinguish between the possibility that legal recognition to same sex relationships should be available via a civil partnership and the proposal that it be available via a marriage, and that perhaps the picture might look a little different if this distinction were to be drawn to the attention of respondents.
14. This distinction was drawn explicitly to respondents' attention in three polls conducted by Angus Reid across Britain as a whole. It invited respondents to choose between three options: *Same sex couples should be allowed to legally marry*, *Same sex couples should be allowed to form civil partnerships, but not legally marry*, and *Same sex couples should not have any kind of legal recognition*. Although on the three occasions on which this question was posed between January

2012 and January 2013, the proportion saying that same sex couples should be allowed to marry was the single most popular response, the proportion in favour was somewhat less than half. However, when on one of these surveys (conducted in January 2013) respondents were then also asked which option they would choose if the only options on offer were to allow same sex couples to legally marry or not, 52% said that they would support same sex marriage, while 38% said they would not. Thus it would appear that not all those for whom same sex marriage is not their first preference are necessarily strongly opposed to its introduction.

15. A yet rather different picture was obtained by an Ipsos-MORI poll of people that was conducted across the whole of Britain in December 2012 and which not only referred to the distinction between marriage and civil partnerships, but also between a civil and a religious marriage. Respondents were invited to choose between the following four options:

A. Gay people should not be allowed to get married to each other and should not be allowed to form a civil partnership

B. Gay people should not be allowed to get married but should be allowed to form a civil partnership

C. Gay people should be allowed to get married to each other but religious organisations should not be required to provide wedding ceremonies to gay people

D. Gay people should be allowed to get married to each other and religious organisations should be required to provide wedding ceremonies to gay people

As many as 45% supported option C while another 28% backed option B, thereby implying that as many as 73% backed same sex marriage. (17% backed option B and 7% option A). It may be that the lesson of this poll is that opposition to same sex marriage diminishes somewhat if it is clear to respondents that its introduction may not necessarily involve religious marriage.

16. Further readings taken by YouGov across Britain as a whole during the height of the debate at Westminster about the introduction of same sex marriage also found consistent evidence, similar to that obtained by Angus Reid, that when faced with the dichotomous choice of supporting or opposing independence, just over half support same sex marriage {11}. (The question was introduced as follows: *Since 2005 same-sex couples have been able to enter into civil partnerships. While civil partnerships offer the same legal rights as marriage, same-sex couples are not able to marry. Would you support or oppose changing the law to allow same-sex couples to marry?*) It might be noted too that it appears that the public debate that surrounded the introduction and passage of legislation by Westminster had no discernible impact on the balance of public opinion.

17. The potential impact of question wording on the pattern of responses obtained is also sharply illustrated by the responses to an item that was carried on behalf of the organisations, Coalition/Scotland for Marriage {12}. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed that, *'Marriage should continue to be a lifelong exclusive commitment between a man and a woman.* Just over half agreed with this proposition, both when it was asked both across Britain as a whole and in Scotland in particular. However, it may be the case that rather than taking the word 'exclusive' to imply that marriage could 'only' take place between a man and a woman, some respondents may have felt that it meant that marriage should be a monogamous relationship, and it is apparent from the most recent BSA survey that there is still widespread disapproval of sexual infidelity (Park and Rhead, 2013).
18. From the available evidence it would appear that following a dramatic change in attitudes towards same sex relations during the course of the last 25 years, a change that has perhaps left some older people and those with strong religious convictions living in an unfamiliar world, that there is now probably a majority, albeit not necessarily an overwhelming one, in favour of same sex marriage, at least when the proposal is posed as a dichotomous choice {13}.

Professor John Curtice
12 September 2013

References

Ormston, R., Curtice, J., McConville, S. and Reid, S. (2011), *Scottish Social Attitudes 2010: Attitudes to Discrimination and Positive Action*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government Social Research. Available at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/08/11112523/1>

Park, A., Bryson, C., Clery, E., Curtice, J. and Phillips, M. (eds) (2013), *British Social Attitudes: the 30th report*, London: NatCen Social Research. Available at <http://www.bsa-30.natcen.ac.uk/>

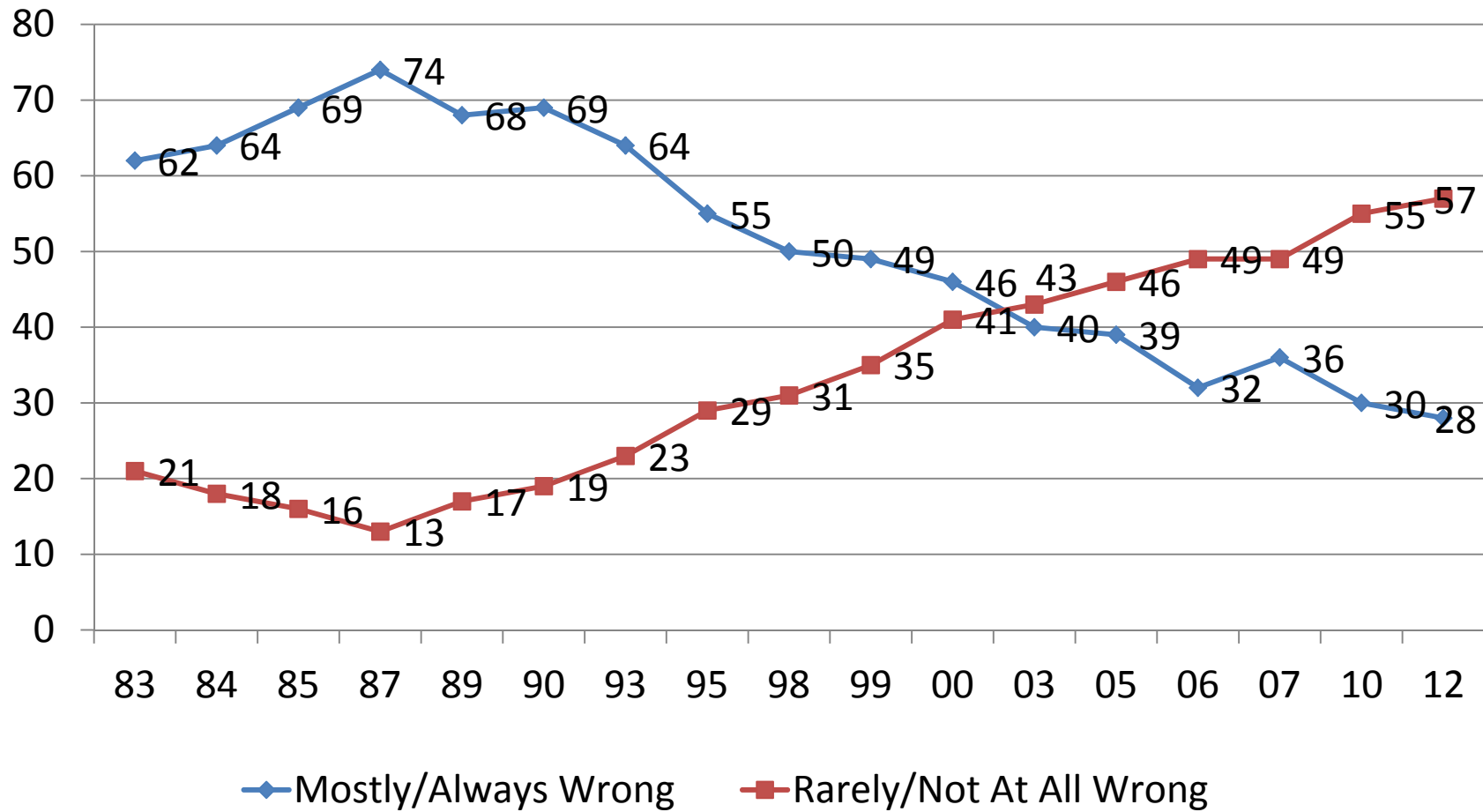
Park, A. and Rhead, R., (2013), 'Personal relationships: Changing attitudes to sex, marriage and parenthood', in Park et al. (2013).

Public Attitudes to Same Sex Marriage

John Curtice

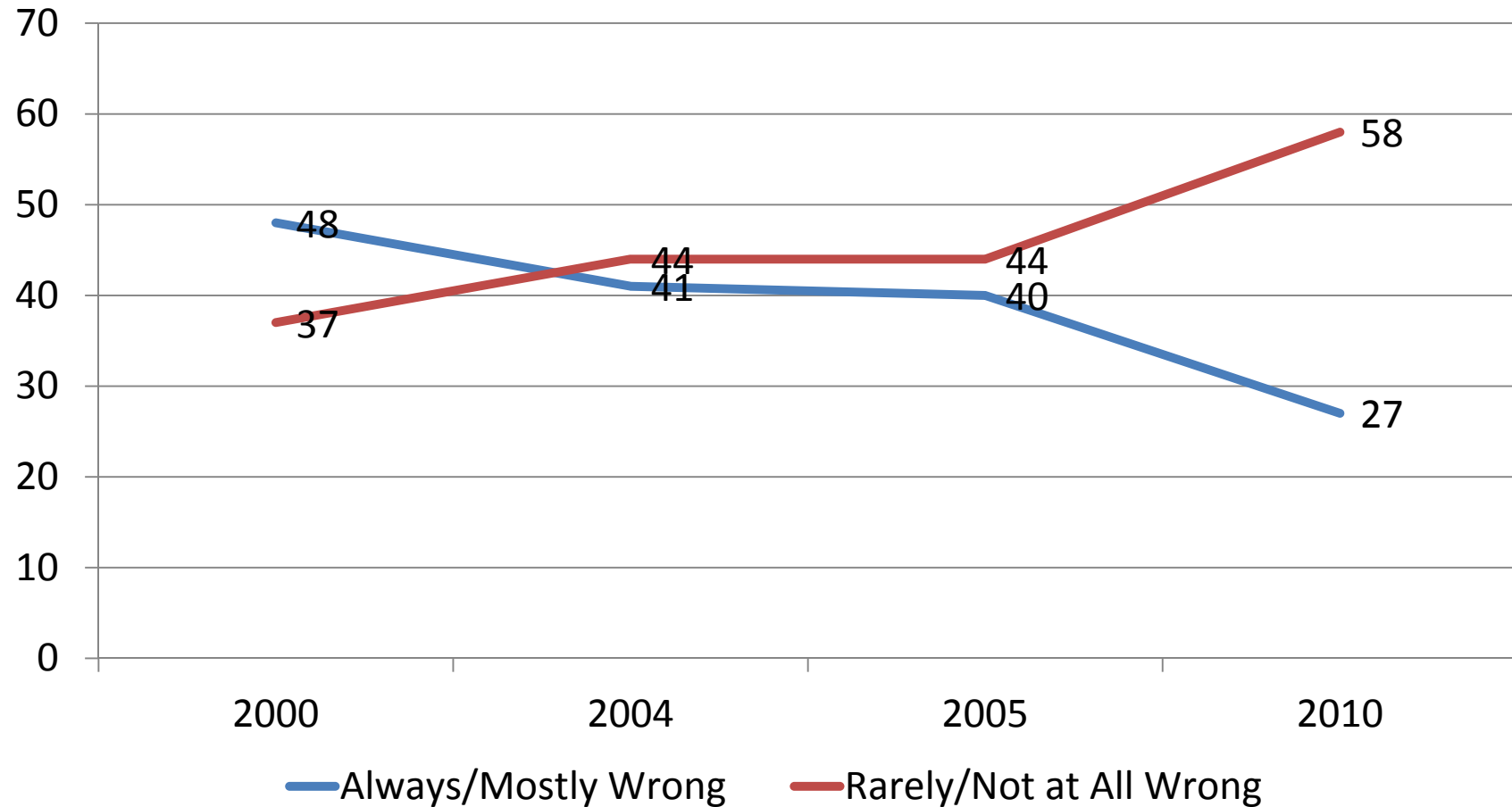
Strathclyde University

A Cultural Revolution?



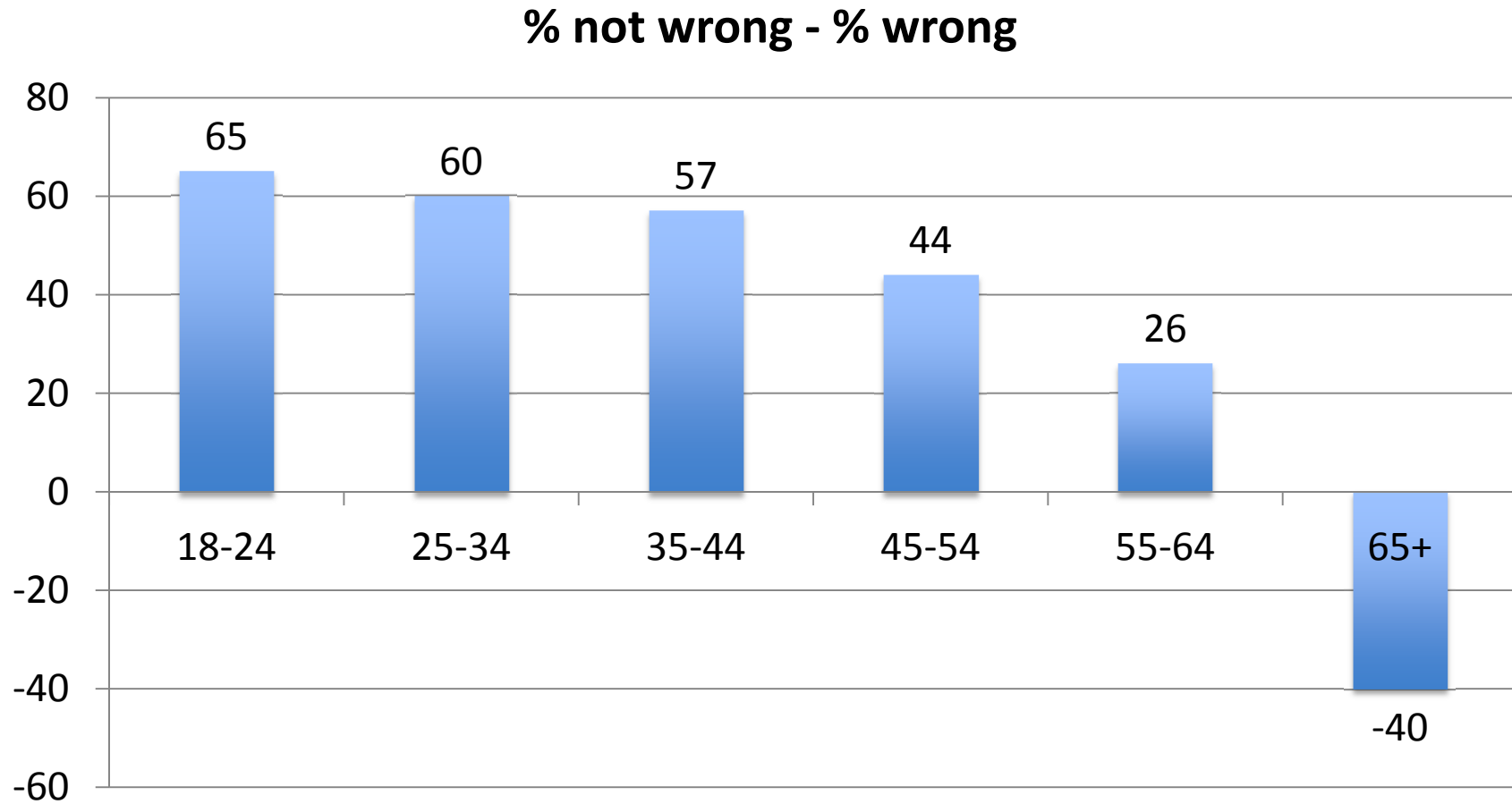
Source: British Social Attitudes

Much the Same Change in Scotland



Source: Scottish Social Attitudes

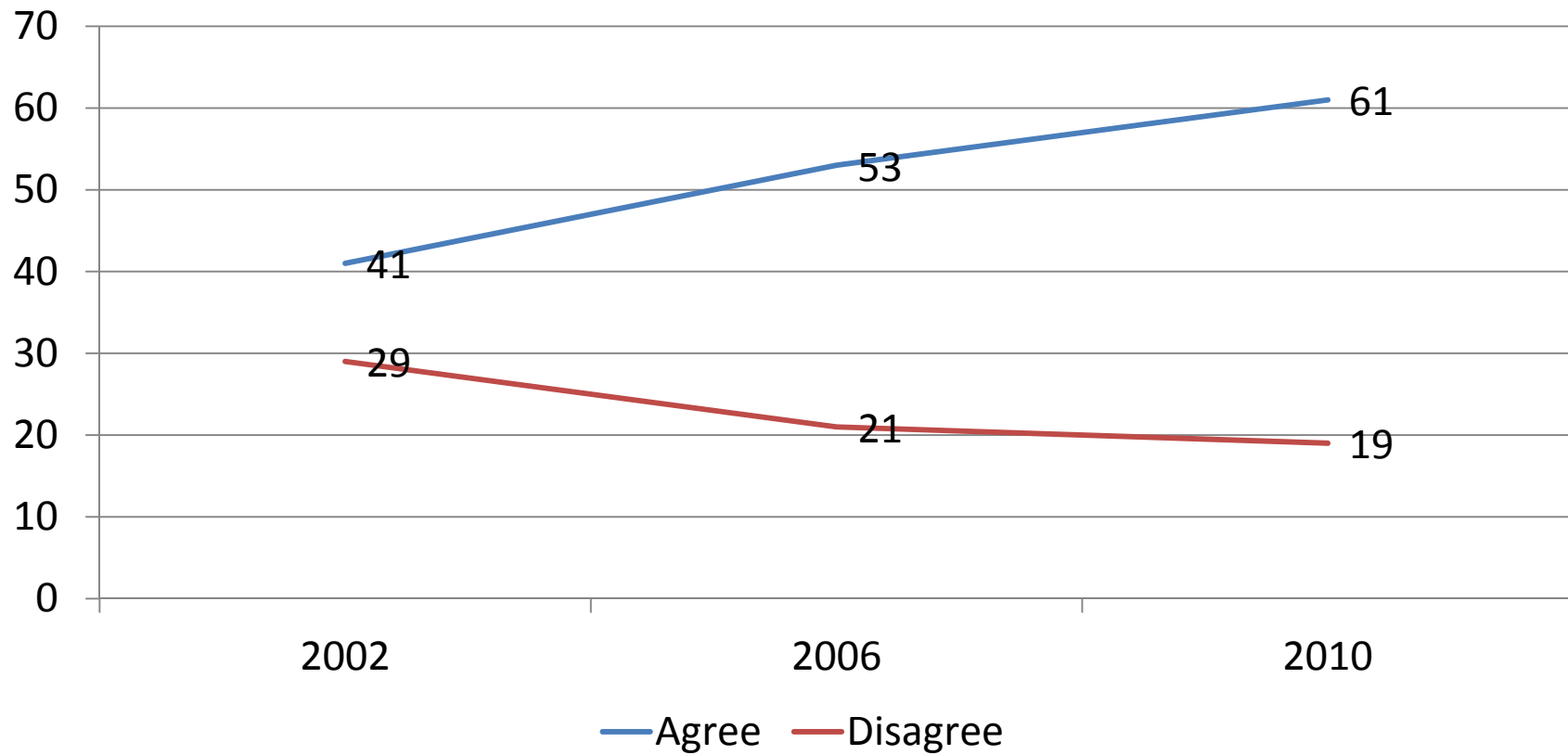
The Generation Gap



Source: SSA 2010

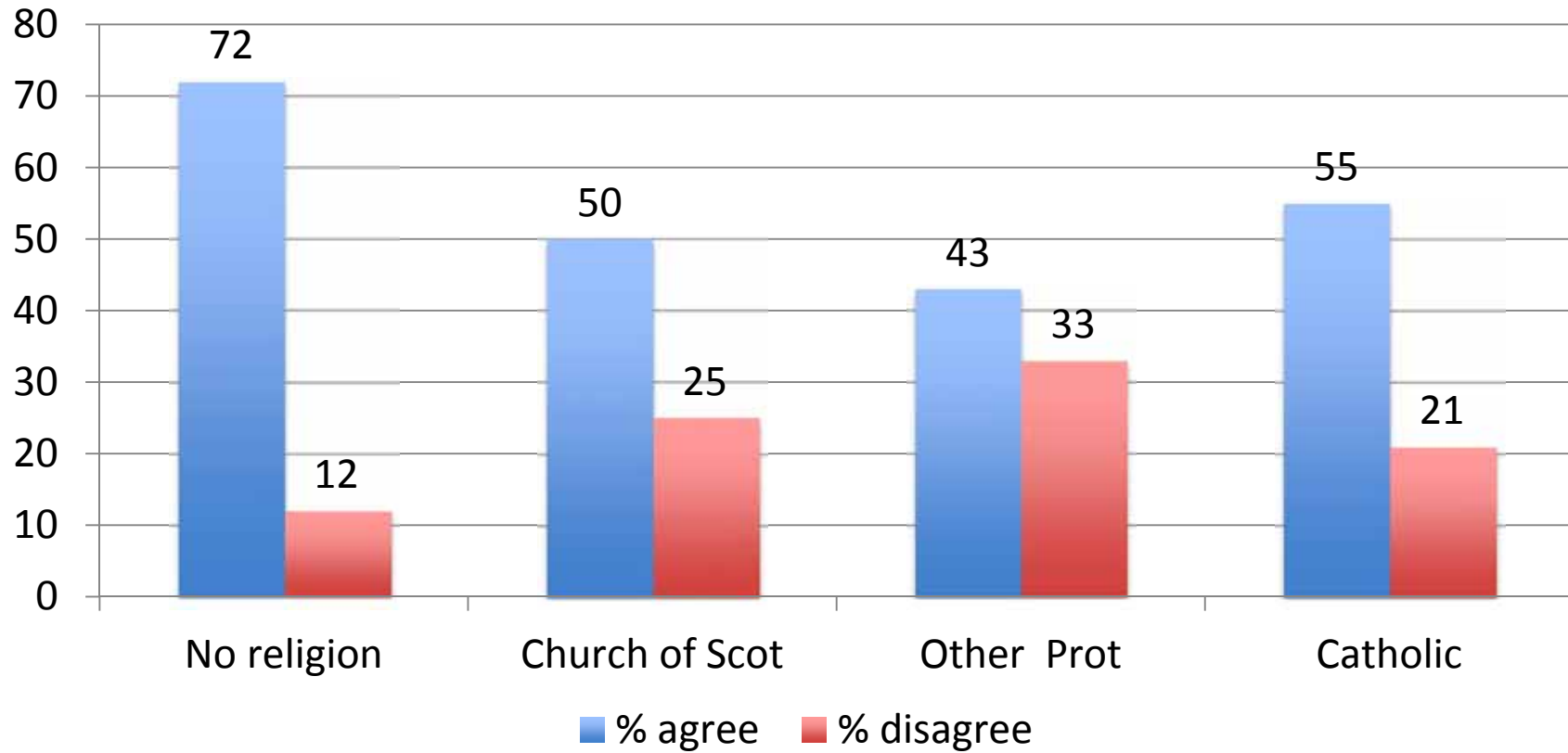
Change Reflected in Attitudes towards 'Gay Marriage'

Gay/lesbian couples should have right to marry

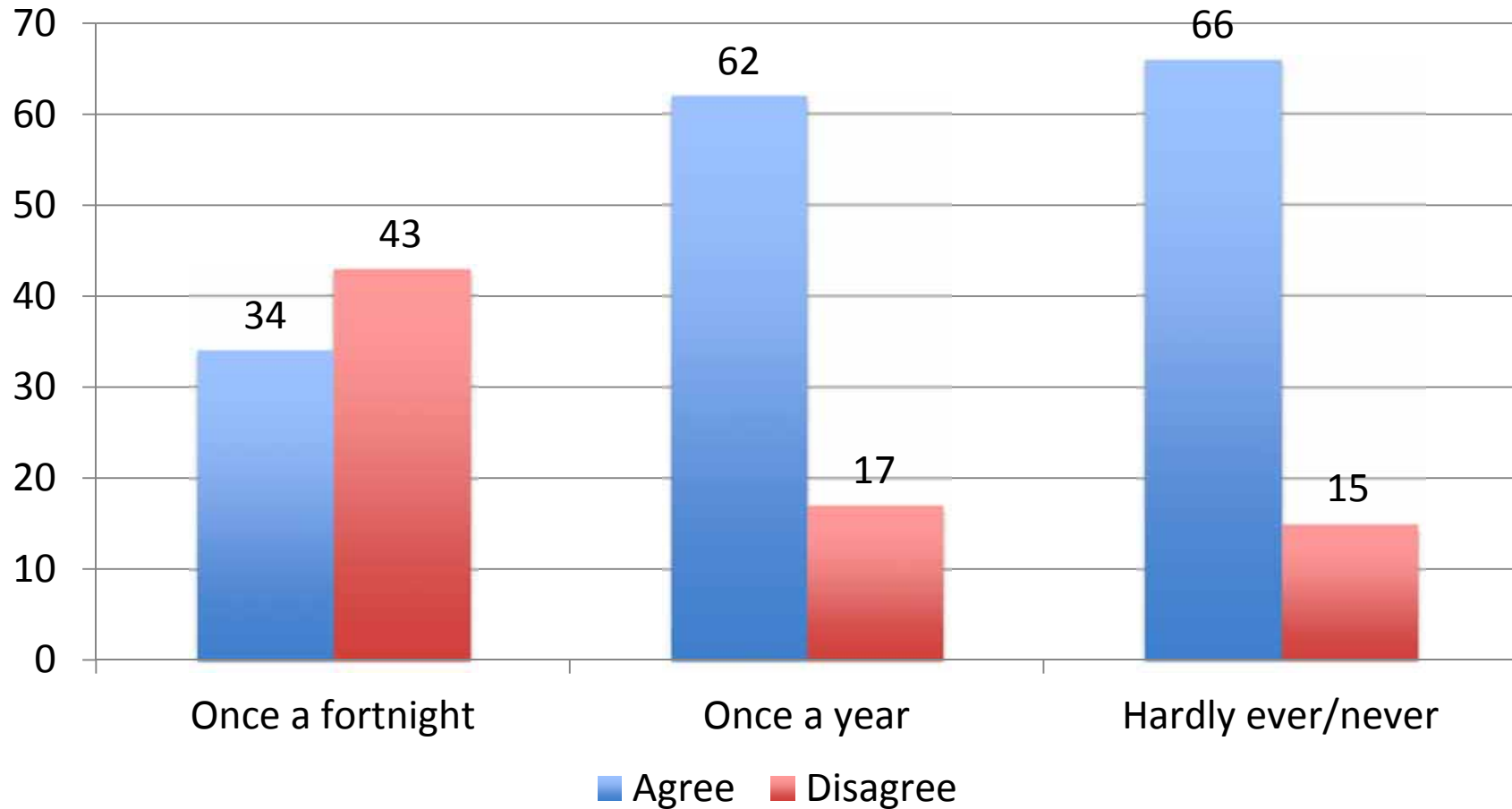


An Issue of Religion?

Gay/Lesbian Couples Right to Marry



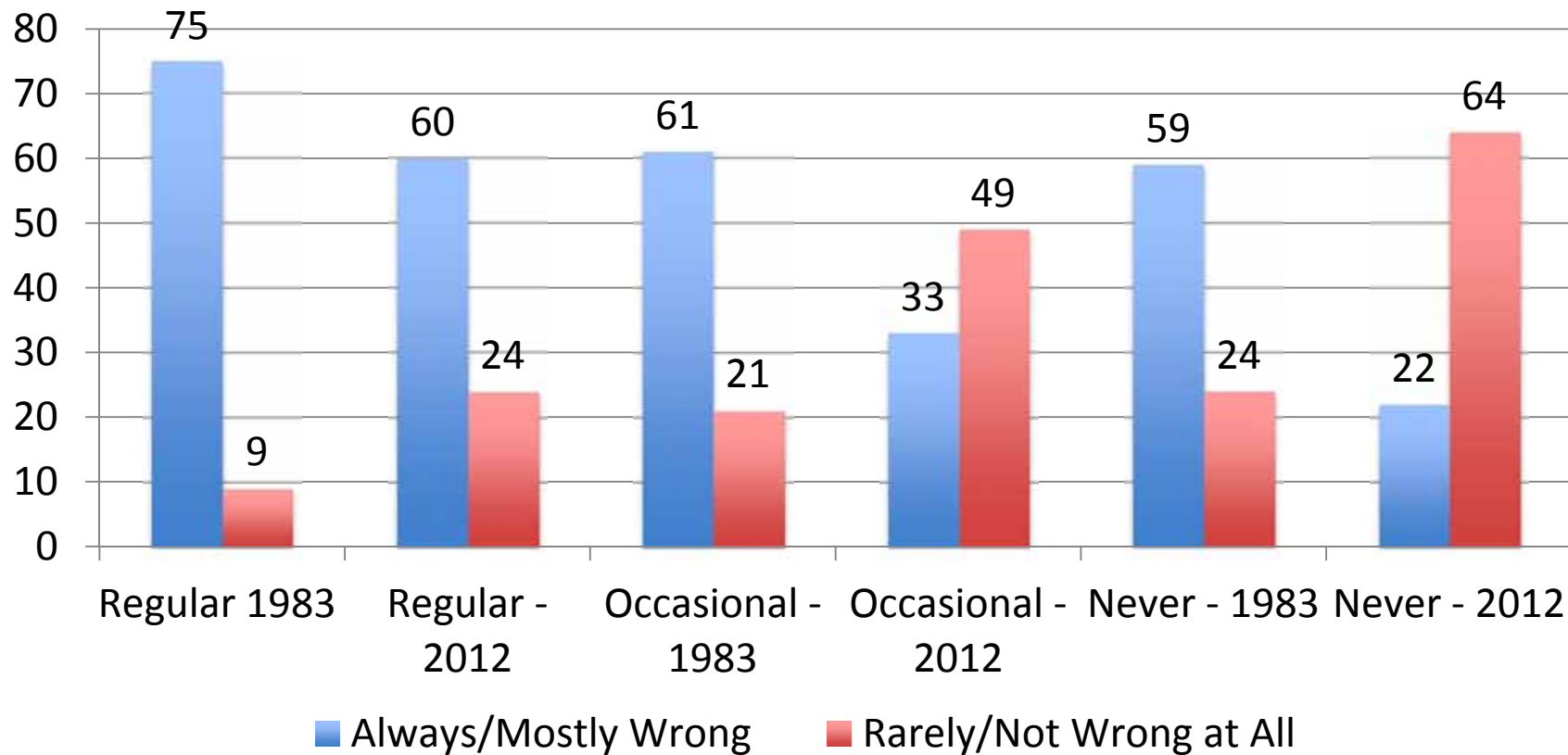
Only for those in the Pews?



Source: SSA 2010

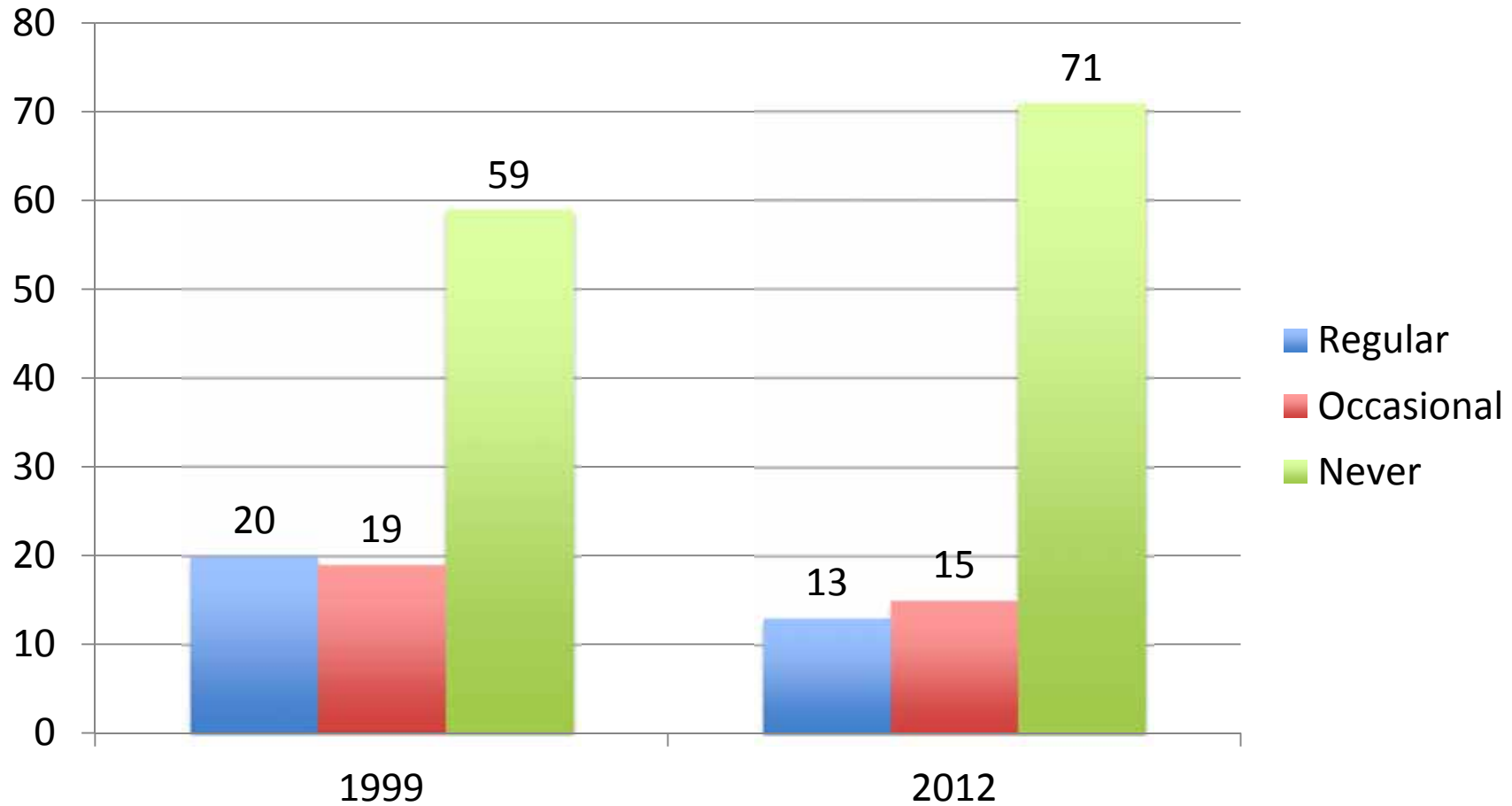
Religious views now very distinctive (though not unchanged)

Attitude to same sex relations



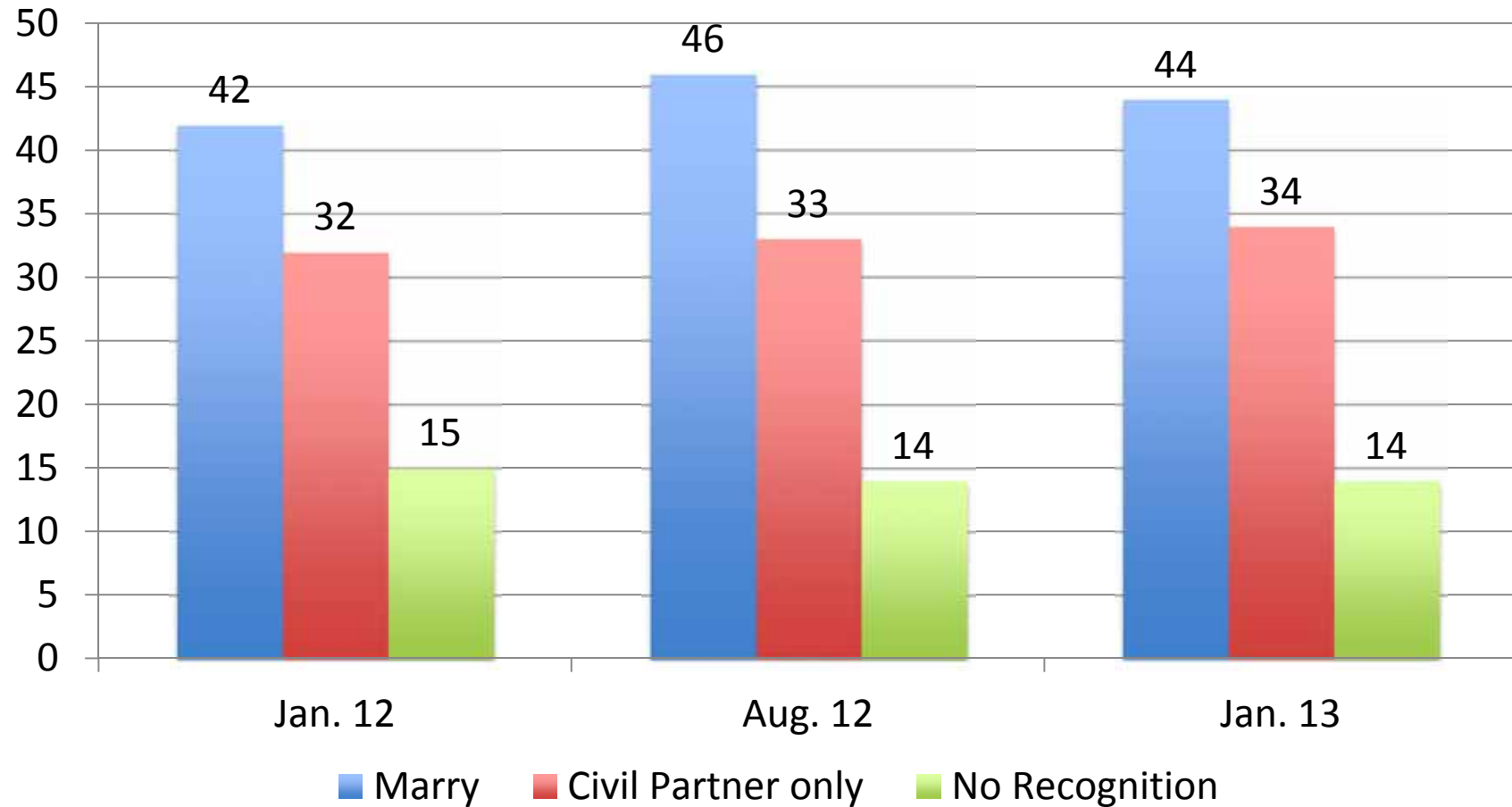
Source: British Social Attitudes

Levels of Religious Attendance



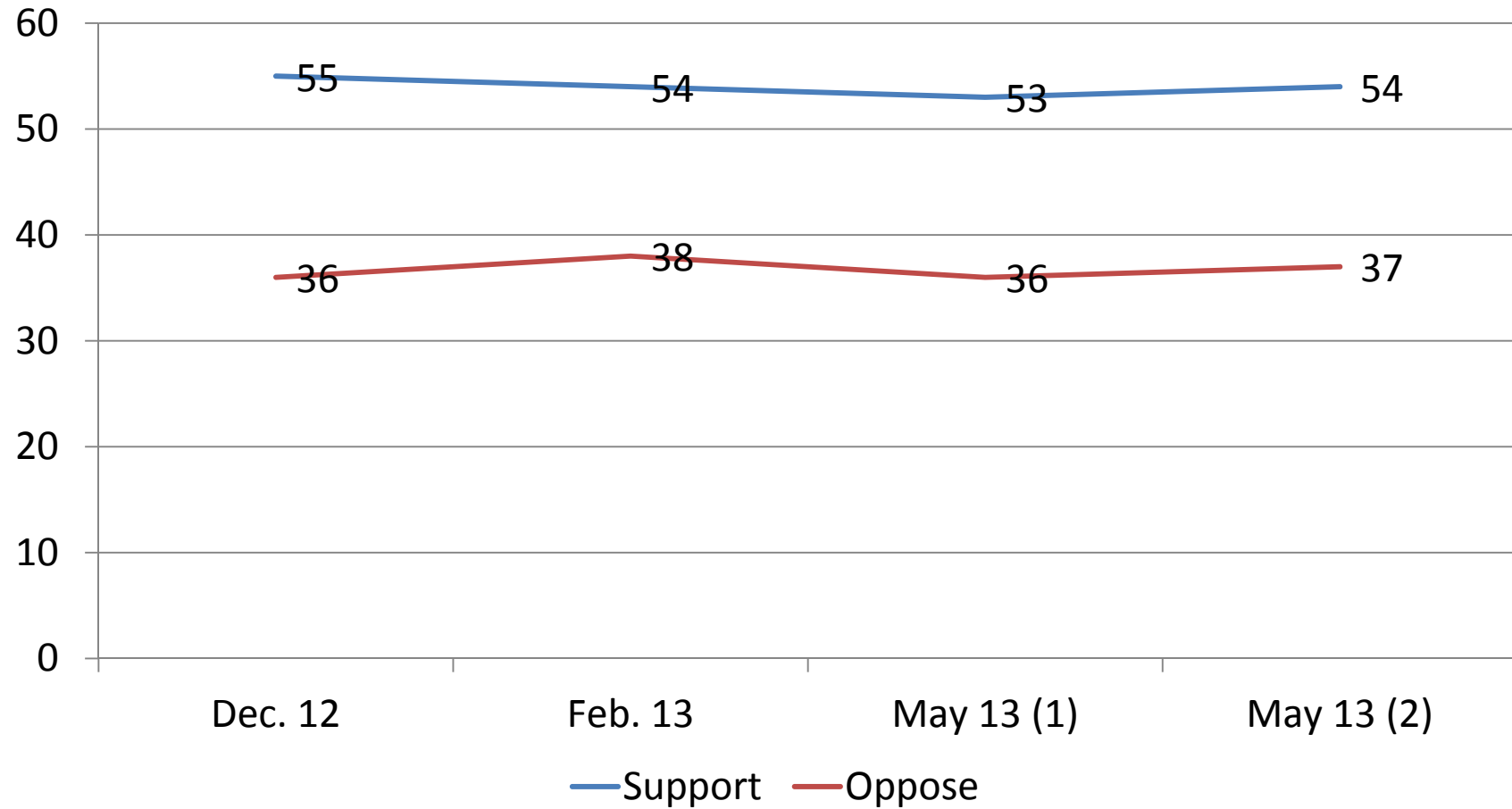
Source: Scottish Social Attitudes

Depends on how you ask us? - 1



Source: Angus Reid (GB)

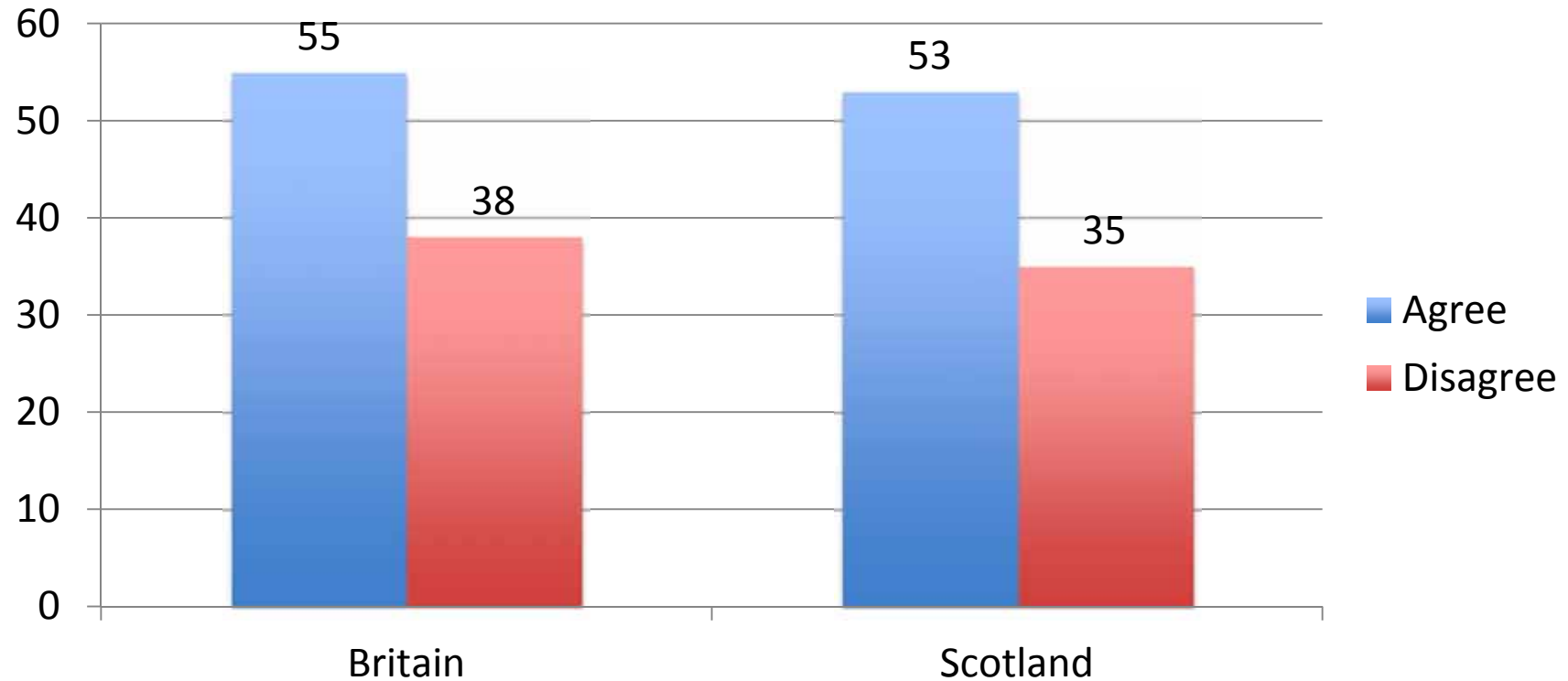
Readings During E&W Debate



Source: YouGov (GB)

Depends on how you ask us? - 2

Marriage should continue to be a lifelong exclusive commitment between a man and a woman



Conclusion

- There has been a dramatic and quite recent change in attitudes towards same sex relationships
- That has left some sections of society behind
- And many religious organisations looking rather isolated
- Now a (not overwhelming?) majority for equal marriage – as a dichotomous choice – and some would still be content with just civil partnerships