

Measuring Public Attitudes Toward Homosexuality Across Countries and Over Time

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Abstract

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Examining the Source Data on Attitudes Toward Homosexuality

Surveys have often included questions about homosexuality over the past half-century, but the resulting data are both sparse and incomparable. That is, these data are unavailable for many countries and years, and they are generated by many different survey items. In all, we identified 45 items that were asked in no fewer than five country-years in countries surveyed at least twice; these items were drawn from 405 different national and cross-national survey datasets.¹ Together, these items were asked in 119 different countries in at least two time points over the 49 years from 1973 to 2022, yielding a total of 3,467 country-year-item observations. Observations for every year in each country surveyed would total 5,831, and a complete set of country-year-items would include 262,395 observations. Viewed from this complete-data perspective, the available data can be seen to be very, very sparse. More optimistically, we do have in the source data 1,479 country-years for which we have at least *some* information about the extent of the acceptance of homosexuality in the population, that is, some 50% of the 2,976 country-years spanned by the data we collected. Still, the many different survey items employed renders these data incomparable and makes them difficult to use together.

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Consider the most frequently asked item in the data we collected, which asks respondents whether they think homosexuality “can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between,” using a ten-point scale. Employed by the Asia Barometer, the European Values

¹The complete list of survey items is included in the Appendix.

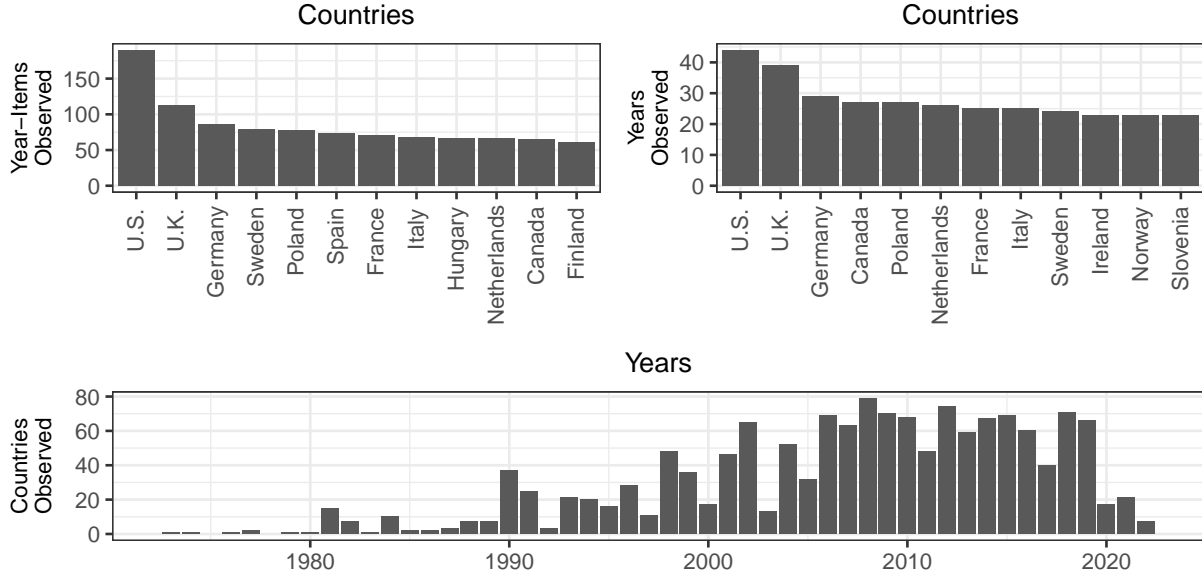


Figure 1: Countries and Years with the Most Observations in the Source Data

Survey, the Latinobarómetro, and the World Values Survey, this question was asked in a total of 527 different country-years. That this constitutes only 18% of the country-years spanned by our data—and remember, this is the *most common* survey item—again underscores just how sparse and incomparable the available public opinion data is on this topic.

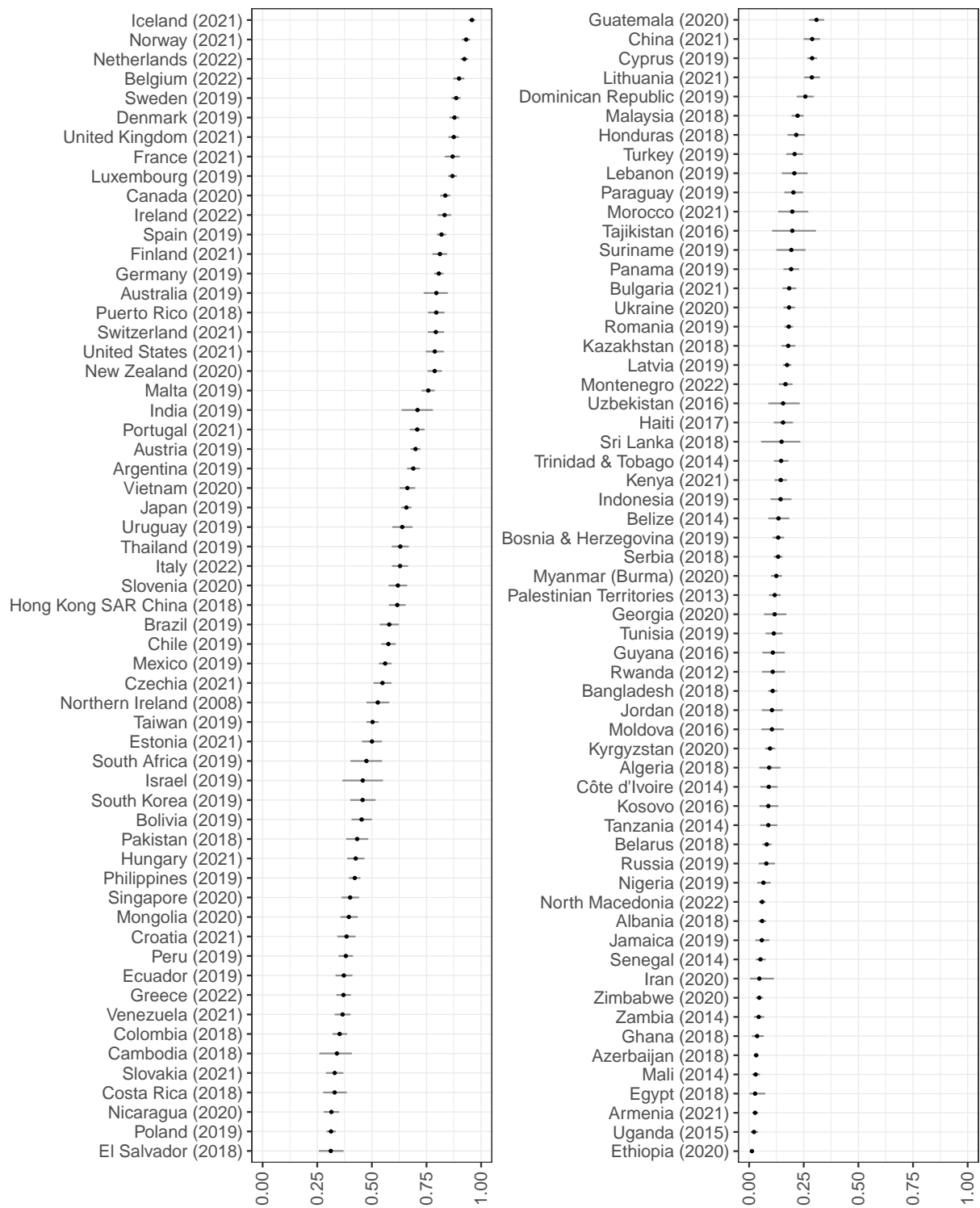
The upper left panel of Figure 1 shows the dozen countries with the highest count of country-year-item observations. The United States, with 190 observations, is far and away the best represented country in the source data, followed by United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, and Poland. At the other end of the spectrum, countries—have only the minimum two observations required to be included in the source dataset at all. The upper right panel shows the twelve countries with the most years observed; this group is similar, but with Ireland, Norway, and Slovenia joining the list and Spain, Hungary, and Finland dropping off. The bottom panel counts the countries observed in each year and reveals just how few relevant survey items were asked before 1990. Country coverage reached its peak in 2008, when surveys in 79 countries included items on homosexuality. In the next section, we describe how we are able to make use of all of this sparse and incomparable survey data to generate estimates of public opinion that are comparable across countries and years using a

latent variable model.

Appendix A: Survey Items Used to Estimate Macrointerest

National and cross-national surveys have often included questions tapping interest in politics over the past four decades, but the resulting data are both sparse, that is, unavailable for many countries and years, and incomparable, generated by many different survey items. In all, I identified 45 such survey items that were asked in no fewer than five country-years in countries surveyed at least twice; these items were drawn from 405 different survey datasets. These items are listed in the table below, along with the dispersion (α) and difficulty (β) scores estimated for each from the DCPO model. Lower values of dispersion indicate questions that better identify publics with a higher level of trust from those with lower. Items have one less difficulty score than the number of response categories. Survey dataset codes correspond to those used in the `DCPOtools` R package (Solt2019?); they appear in decreasing order of country-years contributed.

Together, the survey items in the source data were asked in 119 different countries in at least two time points over 49 years, from 1973 to 2022, yielding a total of 3,467 country-year-item observations. The number of items observed in the source data for each country-year is plotted in Figure 4 below. The estimates of tolerance in country-years with more observed items are more precise. In country-years with fewer observed items, the estimates rely more heavily on the random-walk prior and are therefore more uncertain, and when there are no observed items, the estimates rely *entirely* on the random-walk prior and so uncertainty increases still further.



Note: Gray whiskers represent 80% credible intervals.

Figure 2: (#fig:cs_plot)TCS Scores, Most Recent Available Year

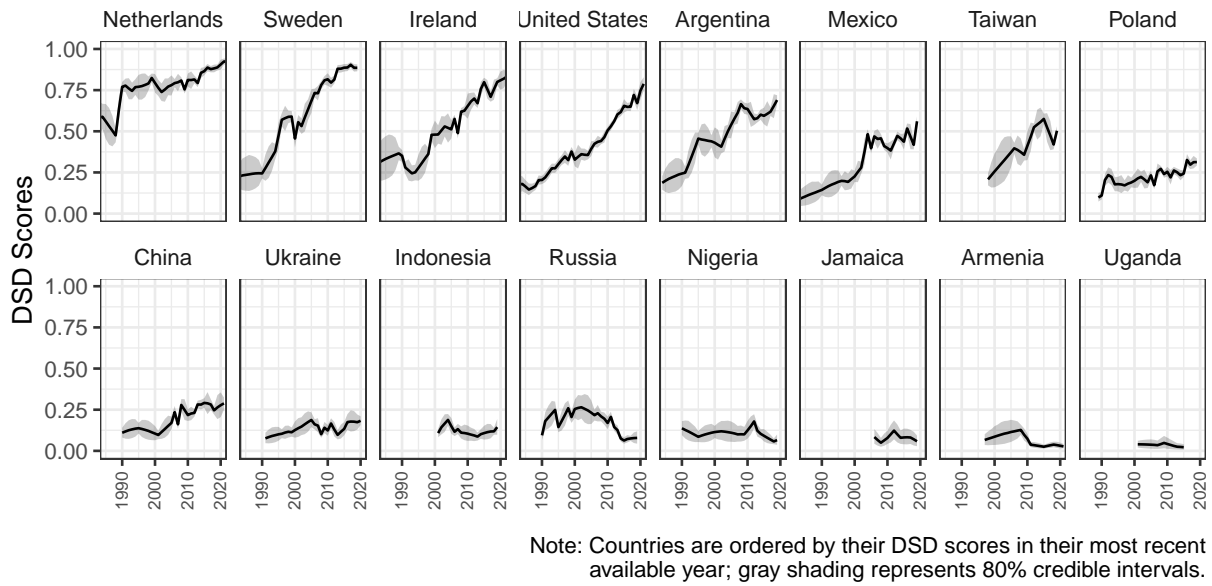


Figure 3: (`#fig:ts_plots`)Tolerance Over Time Within Selected Countries

Table A1: Indicators Used in the Latent Variable Model of Macrointerest

Survey Item Code	Country-Years	Question Text	Response Categories	Dispersion	Difficulties	Survey Dataset Codes
just10	527	Please tell me for each of the following statements whether you think it can always be justified, or something in between, using this card. READ OUT STATEMENTS. COME ONE ANSWER FOR EACH[Homosexuality]	[1-10]1 Never Justifiable 10 Always justifiable	0.42	0.01, 0.30, 0.54, 0.75, 1.39, 1.70, 1.98, 2.35, 2.63	evs, wvs, asiab, lb, caucasusb
neigh2	520	Homosexuals. Would you mind having them as neighbors?	0 Do not have a problem with having them as neighbors / 1 Do not want them as neighbors	0.86	-0.33	evs, wvs, lits, cid, lb, fsdreligion, amb
free5	264	Homosexuality is a personal behavior, others should not blame	1 Strongly disagree / 2 disagree / 3 Neither / 4 Agree / 5 Strongly Agree	1.23	-3.08, -1.53, -0.07, 2.70	ess, ress, seessp, cgss
accept2	211	And which one of these comes closer to your opinion?	1 homosexuality is a way of life that should be accepted by society / 2 homosexuality is a way of life that should not be accepted by society	0.62	0.63	uspew, gallup, pew, pewrel

(continued)

Survey Item Code	Country-Years	Question Text	Response Categories	Dispersion	Difficulties	Survey Dataset Codes
approve4	209	A sexual relationship between two adults of the same sex	1 Very bad 2 Fairly bad 3 Not so bad 4 Definitely not bad	0.20	0.55, 1.00, 1.58	usgss, issp, lat, bsa, allbus, pgss, issr, chcep, seessp, jgss, nsss, twscs
run10	177	And now, changing the topic and thinking of homosexuals, how strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people being permitted to run for public office?	1 Strongly Disapprove 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Strongly Approve	0.56	-0.66, -0.31, -0.05, 0.22, 0.65, 0.96, 1.28, 1.67, 2.00	amb
hioff10	140	Using a scale from 1 to 10, please tell me how you would feel about having a person from each of the following groups in the highest elected political position in	1 Not at all comfortable / 23456789 / 10 Totally comfortable	0.16	-0.82, -0.52, -0.21, 0.03, 0.51, 0.76, 1.06, 1.45, 1.76	eb
approve3	92	Is homosexual behavior morally acceptable, morally wrong, or is it not a moral issue?	1 morally acceptable / 2 morally wrong / 3 not a moral issue	0.43	0.86, 2.00	uspew, pew, pewrel
marry4a	90	Overall, do you support or oppose allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally?	1 Support strongly 2 Support somewhat 3 Oppose somewhat 4 Oppose strongly	0.82	-0.59, 1.06, 3.36	nbcwsj, lat, uspew, prri, abcwapo, pewrel, pew, lb, aes
marry4e	85	For each of the following propositions, tell me if you Homosexual marriages should be allowed throughout Europe?	Totally agree 1 totally disagree 4	0.09	-0.01, 0.84, 2.06	eb
marry10	80	How strongly do you approve or disapprove of same-sex couples having the right to marry?	1 Strongly disapprove / 23456789 / 10 Strongly approve	0.24	0.18, 0.47, 0.67, 0.85, 1.17, 1.36, 1.57, 1.82, 2.06	amb

(continued)

Survey Item Code	Country- Years	Question Text	Response Categories	Dispersion	Difficulties	Survey Dataset Codes
adopt5	80	How acceptable or unacceptable do you consider the following issues? That homosexual and lesbian couples have the right to adopt children	1 completely unacceptable 2 unacceptable 3 neither acceptable nor unacceptable 4 acceptable 5 completely acceptable	0.76	-0.61, 0.74, 1.77, 3.38	bsa, ess, belgiumes, dkes, nores, icenes
parent5	79	How much do you agree or disagree with this statement? Homosexual couples are as good parents as other couples	Agree strongly1 strongly disagree 5	0.88	-1.52, 0.30, 1.53, 3.49	wvs, evs
ashamed5	73	If a close family member was a gay man or a lesbian, I would feel ashamed.	Agree strongly 1 Disagree strongly 5	1.02	-2.56, -0.89, 0.40, 2.31	ess
marry3	69	What is your view on same-sex marriage?	1 Favour same-sex marriage / 2 Oppose same-sex marriage, but would accept civil unions / 3 Oppose entirely same-sex marriage	0.97	-0.75, 0.91	ipsos, cgeis
rights4	57	To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Gay, lesbian and bisexual people should have the same rights as heterosexual people	Totally agree 1 totally disagree 4	0.72	-1.31, -0.12, 1.67	eb, itanes
approve4a	56	To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?There is nothing wrong in a sexual relationship between two persons of the same sex	Totally agree 1 totally disagree 4	0.71	-0.93, 0.34, 2.00	eb
adopt4a	55	Same-sex couples' right to adopt is a good thing	1 strongly agree / 2 somewhat agree / 3 somewhat disagree / 4 strongly disagree	0.55	0.01, 1.03, 2.31	prri, ipsos, prriatlantic, fsdelection, ptvs

(continued)

Survey Item Code	Country-Years	Question Text	Response Categories	Dispersion	Difficulties	Survey Dataset Codes
adopt5a	53	How would you feel about the following statement? Do you agree or disagree with them? Homosexual couples should be able to adopt children	Agree strongly1 strongly disagree 5	1.70	-0.90, 1.41, 3.01, 5.62	evs, som, snes, ptvs
adopt2	51	Do you favor or oppose allowing gay or lesbian couples to adopt a child?	1 Favor 2 Oppose 8 DK/No opinion 9 NA/Refused	0.10	1.60	gallup, anes, cnn, psra, abcwapo, bsa, eb, pew, angus
marry4c	47	Same-sex marriage is or could be harmful to society	1 strongly disagree / 2 somewhat disagree / 3 somewhat agree / 4 strongly agree	0.44	-0.77, 0.33, 1.48	ipsos
marry2	39	Do you think homosexuals should or should not have equal rights to marry one another?	1 Should have equal rights to marry 2 Should not have equal rights to marry 8 DK/No opinion 9 NA/Refused	0.88	1.19	cnn, abcwapo, psra, ap, gallup, uspew, cces, eb, angus, aes
ff5	39	same sex female couple can bring up a child as well as a male-female couple	1 strongly agree / 2 agree / 3 neither agree nor disagree / 4 disagree / 5 strongly disagree	0.74	-0.73, 0.87, 1.62, 3.67	issp
mm5	39	same sex male couple can bring up a child as well as a male-female couple	1 strongly agree / 2 agree / 3 neither agree nor disagree / 4 disagree / 5 strongly disagree	0.72	-0.38, 1.17, 1.94, 3.80	issp
marry5a	33	Here are some statements about general social concerns. Please say whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with each of these statements. Same-sex marriages should be prohibited by law	1 Strongly agree / 2 Agree / 3 Neither agree nor disagree / 4 Disagree / 5 Strongly disagree	0.65	-0.72, 0.39, 1.15, 2.56	ees, ptvs, ines, aes
approve5	30	What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex?	1 Always wrong 2 Mostly wrong 3 Sometimes wrong 4 Rarely wrong 5 Not wrong at all	0.10	0.46, 0.80, 1.32, 1.65	bsa, cgss

(continued)

Survey Item Code	Country-Years	Question Text	Response Categories	Dispersion	Difficulties	Survey Dataset Codes
adopt4	29	For each of the following propositions, tell me if you Adoption of children should be authorised for homosexual couples throughout Europe	Totally agree 1 totally disagree 4	0.76	0.67, 1.81, 3.31	eb
marry5	28	Agree: The law should recognise same-sex relationships	1 Strongly agree / 2 Agree / 3 Neither agree nor disagree / 4 Disagree / 5 Strongly disagree	0.55	-0.26, 0.69, 1.50, 2.95	issp, usgss, bsa, som, chcep, nsss, aussa, kgss
marry11	28	I would like you to tell me your views on various issues: same-sex marriage	0 fully in favour of same sex marriage / 123456789 / 10 fully opposed to same sex marriage	1.13	-0.41, -0.15, 0.17, 0.46, 0.67, 1.58, 1.82, 2.15, 2.50, 2.91	ees
neigh10	27	Having a homosexual	1 Not at all comfortable / 23456789 / 10 Totally comfortable	0.86	-2.38, -1.94, -1.51, -1.20, -0.55, -0.23, 0.15, 0.68, 1.21	eb
civil2	22	.Allowing homosexual couples to have the same benefits as married heterosexual couples, such as health benefits inheritance rights and Social Security survivor benefits	1 Support 2 Oppose 8 DK/No opinion 9 NA/Refused	0.86	0.61	abcwapo, eb, politbarometer, gallup
accept4	20	Homosexuals are people who should be accepted like anybody else	Agree completely 1 Disagree completely 4	0.90	-2.05, -0.92, 0.91	cdcee
pension4	16	Couples of the same sex should be entitled to a widow's/widower's pension as if they had lived with a partner of the opposite sex	1 strongly agree / 2 agree / 3 disagree / 4 strongly disagree	0.81	-0.74, 0.21, 2.03	eb
marry4d	13	Gays and lesbians should be allowed to get married	1 strongly agree / 3 somewhat agree / 5 somewhat disagree / 7 strongly disagree	0.19	0.43, 1.15, 2.42	uspew, fsdelection, cnes, poc, canadianes, twscs

(continued)

Survey Item Code	Country-Years	Question Text	Response Categories	Dispersion	Difficulties	Survey Dataset Codes
neigh5	13	For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbors, dislike it, or not care: Homosexuals	1 strongly dislike / 2 somewhat dislike / 3 would not care / 4 somewhat like / 5 strongly like	0.44	-0.38, 0.18, 1.53, 2.19	afrob
legal2	12	Do you think homosexual relations between consenting adults should or should not be legal	1 should be legal / 2 should not be legal	0.70	-0.21	gallup, abcwapo, cbsnyt, cnn, uswapo, anpas, aes
teacher4	12	School boards ought to have the right to fire teachers who are known homosexuals	1 completely agree / 2 mostly agree / 3 mostly disagree / 4 completely disagree	0.73	-1.55, -0.48, 1.17	uspew
legal2a	9	Do you think gay or lesbian relations between consenting adults should or should not be legal?	1 should be legal / 2 should not be legal	1.69	-0.03	gallup
accept2a	7	Do you feel that homosexuality should be considered an acceptable alternative lifestyle or not?	1 acceptable / 2 not acceptable	1.39	0.44	gallup, usnwr, cbsnyt
accept5	7	Homosexuals are people just like others	1 Disagree completely / 2 Disagree / 3 Neither agree nor disagree / 4 Agree / 5 Completely agree	0.46	-2.18, -1.25, -0.41, 0.80	eb, fsdim
marry4b	6	Do you think it should be LEGAL or ILLEGAL for homosexual couples to get married?	1 Legal, STRONGLY 2 Legal, SOMEWHAT 3 Illegal, SOMEWHAT 4 Illegal, STRONGLY 8 DK/No opinion 9 NA/Refused	0.83	0.41, 0.91, 1.94	abcwapo
approve5a	6	Homosexual relations are always wrong	1 strongly agree / 2 agree to some extent / 3 hard to say / 4 disagree to some extent / 5 strongly disagree	0.52	-1.26, -0.36, 1.06, 2.45	bsa, nzes

(continued)

Survey Item Code	Country- Years	Question Text	Response Categories	Dispersion	Difficulties	Survey Dataset Codes
strength5	6	Strengthen the position of homosexuals, bisexuals and transsexuals in society	1 very good suggestion 2 pretty good suggestion 3 neither good nor bad suggestion 4 pretty bad suggestion 5 very bad suggestion	0.80	-0.35, 0.51, 2.70, 4.16	som
legal5	6	Homosexuals are no better than criminals and should be punished in the extreme	1 agree strongly / 2 agree / 3 neither agree nor disagree / 4 disagree / 5 disagree strongly	0.41	-1.96, -1.04, -0.39, 1.07	seessp
marry3a	5	Do you favour or oppose same-sex marriage, or do you have no opinion on this?	1 favor / 3 oppose / 8 no opinion	0.52	0.72, 2.25	canadianes

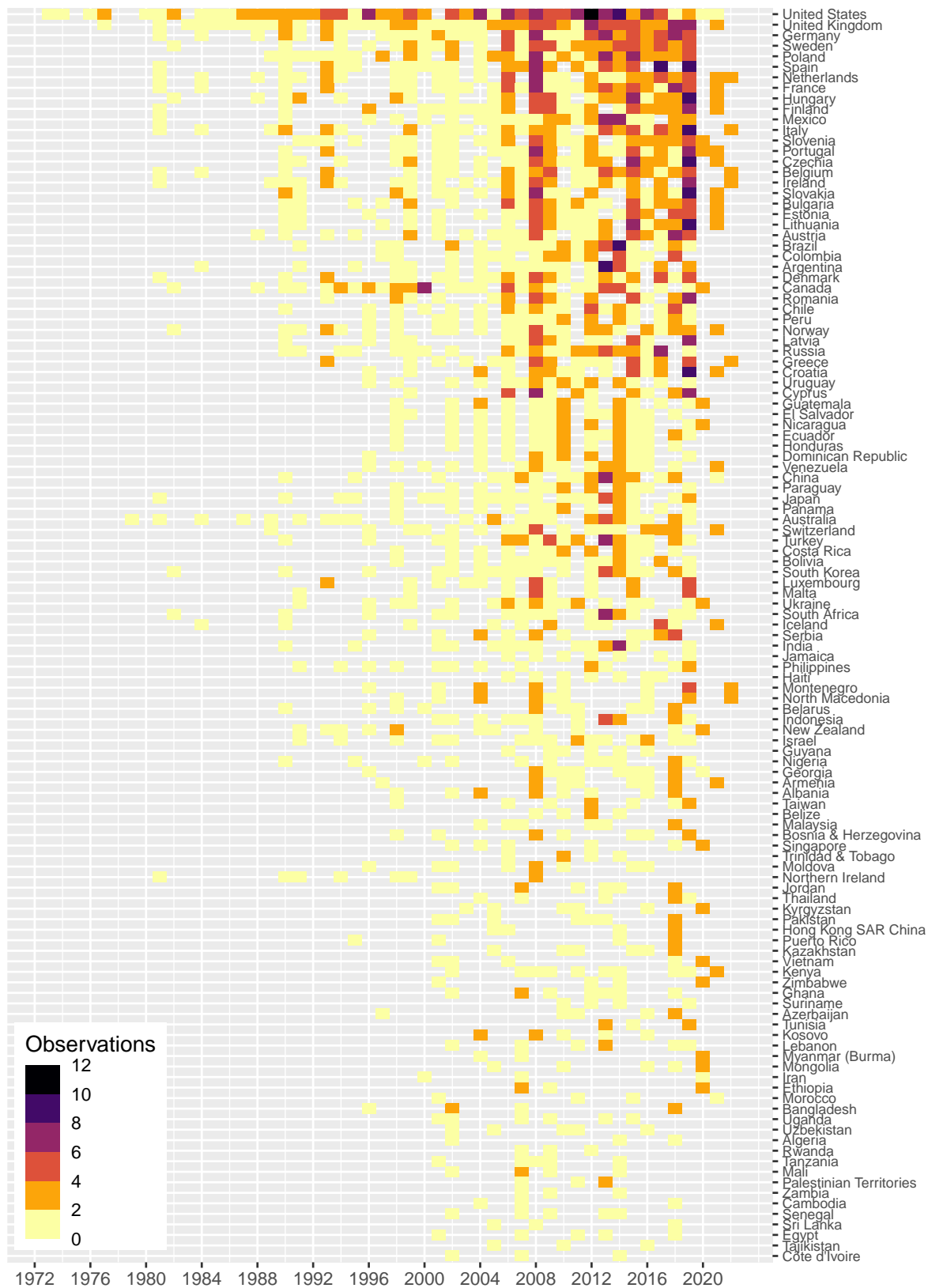


Figure 4: Source Data Observations by Country and Year